

Ancient Egyptian Linguistic Heritage in Hebrew: New Evidence

By

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When Modern Hebrew speakers say *kapara* to their beloved friends, wish them a happy *Hanukka*, or praise their mom's *haroset*, they are actually pronouncing Ancient Egyptian words. These are some of the Egyptian linguistic traces preserved in Hebrew over the millennia and still present today. The Ancient Egyptian lexical heritage detected in Hebrew so far consists of approximately one hundred nouns (units of measures, raw materials, natural elements, technical tools, ritual instruments and procedures, among others¹) and some twenty personal names of central biblical characters (especially related to Moses's family and the Levites²). Regardless of whether the contact took place or not as written in the Patriarchs' stories³, the presence of Ancient Egyptian loanwords in Hebrew attests to the existence of multilingualism and language contact in antiquity, much like the sociolinguistic situation of the Middle East today, where Modern Hebrew is spoken alongside Arabic, Russian, English, and several other languages. According to studies carried out by Yahuda and Noonan⁴ and historical and archaeological evidence⁵, the contact of ancient Hebrew speakers with Egypt was sustained and culturally meaningful. The sociopolitical contact resulted in a linguistic proximity

¹ NOONAN 2016, p. 53-67.

² HESS 2016; HOFFMEIER 2016.

³ See FINKELSTEIN, SILBERMAN, 2001.

⁴ YAHUDA 1947; NOONAN 2016.

⁵ ARIE 2016; DAVIS 2016.

between different phases of Hebrew and Egyptian stretching back to the Egyptian conquest of Canaan during the New Kingdom (1549–1069 BCE), until the Late Period (7th century BCE). I discuss here the hypothesis of the presence of some further Ancient Egyptian loanwords in Hebrew (Egy. *dp.t* ‘ship,’ *hbš* ‘person of eastern African origin,’ *phr* ‘ampoule for medical ointment,’ and *hnwkk* ‘dedication, gift’), a possible Egyptian influence in the Hebrew color term *hūm*, a case of semantically similar lexical items (Hb: *beʔer* ‘to clarify, to explain’/*bāʕar* ‘to burn, to glow’), whose phonological differences in Hebrew may be due to both regular development from the Afroasiatic lexical stock and contact with Ancient Egyptian, and a new interpretation of the word *raʕūf* ‘fresh, newborn,’ in light of Ancient Egyptian data. Words that originated independently in Egyptian and Hebrew from common Afroasiatic roots⁶ are outside the scope of this contribution.

1. *Background Studies on Ancient Egyptian–Hebrew Language Contact*

The multifaceted linguistic connection between Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew lasted several millennia, and ranged between independent developments from the same Afroasiatic background, on one hand, and sociocultural contact, on the other. The sociopolitical contact between Egypt and Canaan resulted in close linguistic proximity between different phases of Hebrew and Old Egyptian (2600–2000 BCE), Middle Egyptian (2000–1300 BCE), and Late Egyptian (1300–400 BCE). It was particularly intense after the Egyptian conquest of Canaan during the New Kingdom period (1549–1069 BCE), when large numbers of Semitic speakers lived in Egypt and developed the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet.

The common origin of Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew in the Afroasiatic phylum certainly explains their striking similarity⁷. Resemblances with Semitic languages are so significant as to have led numerous scholars to include Egyptian within the Semitic family⁸.

As for etymological comparison between Egyptian and Semitic lexicon, the *Neuere Komparatistik* school hypothesized the massive presence of non-systematic developments of the Egyptian and Semitic phonological systems from the common Afroasiatic matrix⁹. Today, however, general trends of regularity regarding the parallel developments of the Semitic and Egyptian phonological systems are highlighted¹⁰. The apparent exceptions to the rules of parallel phonological developments actually constitute important indications of linguistic contact and mutual borrowing¹¹. In the study of Ancient Egyptian loanwords, some uncertainty remains about the pronunciation of the phonemes in the various phases of Ancient Egyptian. See, for example, the emphatic transcription of the Egyptian phoneme /d/ in the word *dny.t* ‘basket’ in the Phoenician *tnʔ* and Hebrew *ʔeneʔ*¹².

⁶ SATZINGER 2002; TAKÁCS 1999.

⁷ DIAKONOFF 1988; EHRET 1995; KOGAN 2015; OREL, STOLBOVA 1995; SATZINGER 1997; TAKÁCS 2011.

⁸ VOIGT 2007; TAKÁCS 2006, 2007, 2011.

⁹ RÖSSLER 1971.

¹⁰ TAKÁCS 2011.

¹¹ CERQUEGLINI 2021.

¹² WATSON 2013.

Regarding the contact-induced similarities between Hebrew and Ancient Egyptian, several aspects, from the morphophonological¹³, to the syntactical¹⁴ and, mainly, the lexical¹⁵ have been studied.

2. *Chronology and Nature of Ancient Egyptian–Hebrew Lexical Contact*

As echoed in the biblical stories of the patriarchs and attested to by archaeological evidence¹⁶, ancient Northwest Semitic speakers in Syria-Palestine had deep, sustained, and culturally significant contact with Egyptian. The study tradition, molded by the biblical exegetical tradition, has particularly emphasized the impact of the Middle and New Kingdoms on the civilizations of the Middle East¹⁷.

The Egyptian presence in the Levant dates from pre-dynastic times, when Egyptians exploited Sinai's copper mines. During the Middle Kingdom, a series of forts was established in the Suez region and the *Execration Texts* mention notable Syro-Palestinian peoples and places. Ugaritic culture was deeply influenced by Egyptian themes and motifs, and the Phoenician city of Byblos served Egyptian trade. The Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom of ancient Egypt represented essential economic and cultural references for the peoples of the Middle East¹⁸. The phenomenal technological, scientific, religious, legal, and administrative impact of Egyptian culture on the nearby Semitic-speaking populations contributed enormously to their world-views¹⁹.

Egyptian seems to have borrowed many words from the Levantine sphere, including Northwest Semitic varieties and north Arabian types²⁰. The *Pyramid Texts* include passages in an Early Northwest Semitic variety, as attested to by serpents' spells²¹. Semitic words were in use in Egypt until the twenty-fifth dynasty and were so common that they became a topic of study in Egyptian scribal schools. In the New Kingdom, a specialized writing system known as 'group writing' was used to write foreign words and names²².

3. *Methodological Notes*

Before delving into the study of Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew loanwords, it is necessary to understand some preliminary notions of comparative phonology. Indeed, if the same root is the origin of etymological cognates in Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew, the derived words should present the regular phonological developments typical of each of the two languages. In the case of loanwords, the phonological developments seem irregular. Take, for example, the Hebrew word *resen* 'bite of the bridle.' Its Proto-Semitic etymology is l.s.n, from which Hebrew regularly derives *lašōn* and Arabic *lisān*, the word for both 'tongue' and 'language.' In *resen*, the initial /r/ is aberrant in relation to the expected phonological developments of l.s.n., and may only come from a cognate language in which the phonological distinction l/r is not stable. This

¹³ LOPRIENO 1995, p. 38; ALLEN 2013.

¹⁴ NICCACCIO 2009.

¹⁵ HESS 2016; HOFFMEIER 2016; NOONAN 2016; YAHUDA 1947.

¹⁶ ARIE 2016; TUCCI 2016.

¹⁷ BATES 2004; HOFFMEIER 2016; RUBIN 2013.

¹⁸ HOCH 1994; KISLEV 2006.

¹⁹ BORG 2019; CONTI 1978; COUROYER 1987.

²⁰ BORG 2021.

²¹ STEINER 2011.

²² HOCH 1994.

language is most likely Ancient Egyptian, which indeed shows the phoneme /s/ as the regular parallel of Hebrew /š/ from the proto-Afroasiatic phoneme /s/.

Old Egyptian distinguished twenty-four consonant phonemes in its writing. Some Old Egyptian phonemes represent a merger of diverse proto-phonemes²³. Table 1 presents the etymological parallels established between Old Egyptian (OE) and Semitic (Sem), as shown by Takács (2011), different from those proposed in the *neuere Komparatistik*²⁴. In the third row, I introduce the corresponding ancient Hebrew (Heb) phonemes:

OE	ʒ	j	ʕ	w	b	p	f	m	n	r	h	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	z	s	š	q	k	g	t	ṭ	d	ḏ	
Sem	r l	y ʔ l r	ʕ γ	w y	b	p	p	m	n l	r l	h	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	z ḏ	s š	š ₁ š ₂	q	k	g	t	ṭ	k	d	g š z ṭ
Heb	r l	y	ʕ	w	b	p		m	n l	r l	h		ḥ		z	š s	ś	q	k	g	t	š	ṭ	ḏ	š

Table 1. Egyptian–Semitic–Hebrew Consonant Correspondences

The realizations of some OE phonemes have changed over time. Proto-Afroasiatic (PAA) */k/ was realized as both non-palatalized [k] and palatalized [ṭ], as attested to in the *Pyramid Texts* (ALLEN 2015) throughout the third millennium BCE. Palatalization also affected PAA */g/ > ḏ and PAA */l/ and */r/ > j [y]. PAA *l and *r also developed in the direction of “a kind of voiced alveolar or dental vibrant or rolled sound (‘Egyptian aleph’)”²⁵, i.e., the /ʒ/, which later weakened into a glottal stop /ʔ/.

Other phonological and phonetic changes occurred in the course of the history of Egyptian²⁶. Some of these are useful tools for dating lexical loans in Semitic languages. Beyond phonology, the basic common Egyptian–Semitic parallel elements of nominal and verbal morphology are summarized by Takács (2011).

4. New Proposals

Many Hebrew words have been recognized as having Egyptian origin. A striking case concerns the names of biblical characters relating to the story of Moses and the group of Levites: Moses, Miriam, Aaron, Merari, Phinehas, Putiel, Assir, and Hophni²⁷. Certainly, the presence of characters with prestigious Egyptian names in the family of Moses and among the Levites attests to the close relationships between the leaders of the biblical exodus and the foundation of Jewish identity in the Land of Israel and the Egyptian elites, as alluded to in the biblical account of the adoption of Moses by the daughter of the pharaoh, i.e., the heir to the throne. Since, therefore, part of the Jewish group of the Mosaic period had close ties to the top level of Egyptian society, the presence of Egyptian words in the lexicon of Jewish holidays is not surprising. In the terminology of Passover, the word *haroset* echoes the word for ‘mud’ in Ancient

²³ TAKÁCS 2011.

²⁴ GENSLER 2015, p. 190.

²⁵ TAKÁCS 2011.

²⁶ GOEDICKE 1955; OSING 1997 and 2001; VYICHL 1957.

²⁷ NOONAN 2016.

Egyptian. In the words *kippūr* (atonement) and *kappara* (atoning sacrifice), a phonetic reinterpretation of *hpr*, the Egyptian name of the Holy Scarab, could be present.

Another word related in Jewish religious traditions to the Yom Kippur is *pehar*, piece of pottery, ‘broken and ominous as the dawn of the atonement,’ as it is described in common Jewish sayings. This word is found in Ancient Egyptian as *phr* ‘jar’ and *phr.t* ‘ampoule with medical ointment, magic potion’²⁸.

Furthermore, interestingly, the root of the word *Ḥanukka*, the name of the Jewish Festival of Lights, is found in Middle Egyptian as *hunkek* with the meaning ‘to make an offering’²⁹. Both the Hebrew meaning of ‘dedication’ (of the Temple, which constitutes the historical origin of the festival) and the custom of exchanging gifts may derive from this word. In Hebrew, the root *ḥ.n.k.*, without reduplication of the third radical, also has the meaning of ‘education,’ ‘initiation.’

Another interesting word is Hebrew *daf* ‘sheet,’ the common word designating a sheet of paper. This word is attested to in Egyptian as *dp.t*, with the meaning of ‘ship.’ The word derives from Sumerian DUB and Akkadian *tuppu* ‘writing support,’ and can be considered a culture word of the ancient Middle East. The Hebrew form with the initial /d/ attests, however, to an Egyptian phonetic ‘flavor.’ The same word is used in Palestinian Arabic as *zaffa*, as in *az-zaffa al-ḡarbiya* ‘the West Bank’ and in Omani Arabic, where *daffa* designates the side of the boat. According to Borg (2021), Egyptian *dp.t* in fact designated the wooden panels used in ancient Egypt to build the sides of boats.

The word used to designate people from the Horn of Africa is also a ‘culture word’ shared by many languages in the Middle East. Its root, *ḥ.b.s* (Heb. *ḥ.b.š*), is common to Egyptian and Semitic, and its meaning is ‘to capture, to enslave.’ As in other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean languages (French *abyssins*, Italian *abissini*, Geez *habaša*, Arabic *al-ḥabša*), Hebrew *ḥabāšīm* refers to the inhabitants of the Ethiopian area. In Ancient Egyptian, the word *ḥbš* means specifically ‘incense picker.’ Egypt notoriously dominated the regions of today’s Ethiopia and Somalia precisely to satisfy the need for raw materials, including incense. For this reason, it is possible that the semantic merging of the meaning ‘slave, incense collector’ and ‘inhabitant of the Ethiopian region’ took place within Ancient Egyptian, and that this meaning was then passed on to other languages, such as Hebrew, Arabic, and Geez. Interestingly, for the meaning ‘to imprison, to size,’ Hebrew has the root *k.b.š.*, with the initial /k/, parallel of Arabic *k.b.s.*, ‘to capture, to arrest.’

As for the Hebrew word used to indicate the color brown, *ḥūm*, it has no etymological parallels in the Semitic linguistic landscape. As demonstrated by cross-linguistic data³⁰, the word for ‘brown’ emerges in relatively late stages of the development of color systems, at least after white, black, red, green, yellow, and blue have already been distinguished. The word for ‘brown’ can thus derive from nouns of objects that have this particular chromatic quality or were borrowed from other languages. In general, brown is differentiated from the dark part of the light spectrum and first included in the black category. Across Semitic languages and in Ancient Egyptian there is a quasi-perfect match for Hebrew *ḥūm* in the root for ‘black’ *k.w.m.*, from which the Modern Hebrew word *ḥokmanyot* ‘blackberries’ derives, as well as Ancient Egyptian *kwm.t*, lit. ‘the black one (f.),’ ‘the land of Egypt.’ In fact, a regular development from *k.w.m.* should have produced the Hebrew word **kūm*. The initial /ḥ/ might be explained by a phonetic interpretation of the Egyptian pronunciation of the initial /k/. However, we remain in

²⁸ TAKÁCS 2003, p. 505.

²⁹ FAULKNER 1962.

³⁰ BERLIN, KAY 1969.

the realm of hypothesis because in fact we do not know with certainty much about the pronunciation of Egyptian phonemes in the different morphophonological positions.

In the history of Hebrew, /ʔ/ and /ʕ/ have always remained distinct phonemes. Nonetheless, an interesting doublet of roots is found with analogous meanings in which /ʔ/ and /ʕ/ curiously alternate. The roots are b.ʔ.r. and b.ʕ.r., both related to the same semantic field related to some light effect of clearance and glowing. The first root produces Hebrew *beʔer* ‘to clarify, to explain’ and the second root produces *bāʕar* ‘to burn, to glow.’ In Ugaritic, the root b.ʔ.r. expresses the concept of ‘shining of stars’³¹, while in the Modern South Arabian Jibbāli language b.ʕ.r. expresses the meaning of ‘going out at night’³². Interestingly, in Ancient Egyptian, *bʔʒ* means ‘starry sky.’ Probably the presence of either /ʔ/ or /ʕ/ represents alternative phonetic renditions of the same phoneme in Egyptian³³. Different Egyptian pronunciations of the same root may have thus reached different Semitic languages in the Egyptian sphere of influence.

The last suggestion is related to the etymological connection between the Hebrew words *raʕūʕ* ‘tenuous, limp’ and *reʕanen* ‘to refresh’ and the name of the Egyptian sun god, Ra. The doublet of Hebrew roots r.ʕ.ʕ./ r.ʕ.n.n. is all connected to the semantic field of freshness, both as a sensation of coolness and as a quality of novelty and youth. The existence of a semantic network that directly connects freshness to youth, coolness, and softness is typologically well attested and present also in Northwest Semitic languages (Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Hebrew) in the root r.k. Hebrew *raḵ* means ‘soft, fresh, newborn’ and *gīl raḵ*, lit. ‘fresh age’ is synonymous of ‘youth.’ In Ancient Egyptian, the name of the sun god, Ra, comes from the bilateral root r.ʕ.³⁴ In particular, Ra as solar deity was related to the rising or resurrecting, newborn sun and opposed to other aspects of the mature and otherworldly sun that manifest during the afternoon and the night. The bilateral root r.ʕ. entered from Ancient Egyptian may have been adjusted in Hebrew in order to fit the trilateral and quadrilateral regular patterns by addition of a third radical and by reduplication. The roots of *raʕūʕ* ‘tenuous, limp’ and of *raʕ* ‘bad’ (r.ʕ.ʕ., Akkadian *raggu*³⁵) are in fact only homophonous.

5. Conclusions

This contribution draws attention to new hypotheses regarding the etymology of Hebrew words in the light of the Ancient Egyptian lexicon. Many points remain to be clarified, especially with regard to the pronunciation of Ancient Egyptian words in the different stages of the language. Nevertheless, the exploration of the linguistic and cultural relationships between the Egyptian and the Semitic world in general, and the Hebrew world in particular, remains an inexhaustible source of interest and surprises. With this enthusiasm, I dedicate this writing to Professor Jean-Claude Haelewyck, who welcomed me into the ABELAO's family, and I wish him many new exciting philological adventures.

³¹ RENDSBURG 1957.

³² JOHNSTONE 1981.





³³ OSING 1997.

³⁴ FAULKNER 1962, p. 147.

³⁵ EVEN-SHOSHAN 1979: 2544.

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ABSTRACT

The Ancient Egyptian lexical heritage detected in Hebrew so far consists of approximately one hundred nouns (units of measures, raw materials, natural elements, technical tools, ritual instruments and procedures, among others) and some twenty personal names of central biblical characters (especially related to Moses’s family and the Levites) have been identified. According to the linguistic research conducted until now, the contact of ancient Hebrew-speakers with Egypt was sustained and culturally meaningful. I discuss here the hypothesis of the presence of some further Ancient Egyptian loanwords in Hebrew (Egy. *dp.t* ‘ship,’ *ḥbš* ‘person of eastern African origin,’ *pḥr* ‘ampoule for medical ointment,’ and *ḥnwkk* ‘dedication, gift’), a possible Egyptian influence in the Hebrew color term *ḥūm*, a case of semantically similar lexical pair (Hb: *bʔr* ‘to clarify’/ *bʕr* ‘glow’), whose phonological differences in Hebrew may be due to both regular development from the Afroasiatic lexical stock and contact with Ancient Egyptian, and a new interpretation of the word *rafūf* ‘fresh, newborn,’ in light of Ancient Egyptian data.

KEYWORDS

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