AN EGYPTIAN LOANWORD IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH AND THE DEIR ‘ALLA INSCRIPTION: HEB. נָצֵר, ARAM. نَجِر, AND EG. ṃḥr AS “[DIVINIZED] CORPSE”

Christopher B. Hays
Fuller Theological Seminary

The term נָצֵר in Isa 14:19 has generated numerous and diverse explanations, without any one winning much enthusiasm. In light of the growing awareness of Egyptian influence on the Levant during the eighth and seventh centuries,1 and on the book of Isaiah in particular,2 this article argues that term is best explained as a loanword3 from the common Egyptian noun ṃḥr. ṃḥr is generally translated “god,” but is commonly used of the divinized dead and their physical remains. It originally came into Hebrew as a noun referring to the putatively divinized corpse of a dead king, which is closely related to the Egyptian usage. Furthermore, this etymology suggests new solutions to two other instances of the same Hebrew root later in the book of Isaiah (49:6 and 65:4), and to the long-debated term ṃḥ in Deir ‘Alla II.5, 12, 14. The article concludes by showing that there is sufficient warrant from the historical philological data to warrant the slightly uncommon phonological correspondence of Egyptian ṃḥ with Hebrew נָצֵר and Aramaic نَجِر.

Isa 14:19 reads, as a whole:

Apart from one phrase, most of the verse is clear enough in its description of the degradation of a Mesopotamian king after his death: “But you are cast out from your grave, like נָצֵר נָתַעַב, clothed with the murdered, those pierced with the sword, those who go down to the stones of the pit, like a trampled corpse.”

The variety of translations for נָצֵר נָתַעַב reflects the variety of theories about it:

• The most linguistically plausible theory propounded thus far relates נָצֵר to the word for “shoot, branch,” which is used elsewhere in Isaiah (11:1; 60:21). This is adopted by the Vulgate (stirps inutilis), NJB: “loathsomely branch,” NASV, and NIV (“rejected branch”). But נָצֵר in this sense usually means “heir, son,” not a natural term for a seasoned ruler who had already terrorized the earth (Isa 14:16-17). This is also the etymology that André Caquot and André Lemaire suggested for נָצֵר in the Deir ‘Alla text.

• Baruch Levine suggested that the forms from נָצֵר Isa 14:19 and 49:6, and נָצֵר in Deir ‘Alla, should be connected to postbiblical נִצֵּר, “flesh from a corpse which has become detached,” based on a rare r / l confusion,4 and this proposal seems to lie behind recent translations such as NRSV and NJPS (both: “loathsome carrion”), if these are not simply translating from context.3 But that theory was deemed highly unlikely by Jo Ann Hackett and is not adopted here.3 She calls the connection to נִצֵּר “linguistically shaky,” though she acknowledges that the context of Isa 14:19 seems to require a word with a similar meaning.

• Wildberger suggested reading נֶשֶׁר (“vulture”) in Isa 14:19 rather than the MT’s נֵצֶר, on the theory that the latter was a scribal emendation to connect the poem to Nebuchadnezzar.7 The vulture is an unclean bird and is associated with the dead throughout the ancient Near East,8 but this emendation does not create a convincing image (“you are cast out … like a vulture?”) and can only be considered speculative.

• Finally, the RSV (“a loathed untimely birth”) seems to have followed the suggestion to read נָצֵר, “miscarriage.” Not only would this require a textual error that would be hard to explain, it would not create a very coherent image with the rest of the poem.

Finding none of these solutions appealing, I propose that נָצֵר is a loanword from the Egyptian noun ṃḥ, and refers to the dead person or corpse. Happily, this is in line with the reading of the Old Greek (ὡς νεκρός ἐβδολυγμένος, “like an abhorrent corpse”). This could be taken as a mere translation from context, or it could reflect an accurate understand of the underlying Hebrew term, which has not to this point been adequately explained.
In Egyptian, nṯr most basically means “god,” but as Hans Goedicke has noted, “Nṯr, singular and plural, is well attested as designation of the deceased.” Among other things, a nṯr is simply “one of those who inhabit the afterlife.” Indeed, descriptions of the dead, particularly dead rulers, as gods are well-attested throughout Egyptian history:

The expression h m nṯr (“to appear as a god”) is attested in the funerary literature of the New Kingdom where it refers to the establishing of the deceased as ritually equipped dead. In this respect it appears to be a continuation of an older concept found in Papyrus 465 b, where h m nṯr is used in reference to the establishing of the deceased as ritually buried dead.

To be clear, it not just that the deceased was viewed as having become a god in some spiritual sense; the physical remains were actually referred to as nṯr. This can be seen in a Dynasty 21 text about the reburial of the mummy of king Amenhotep I, which reads, “The First Prophet of Amon-Re, King of the Gods, Masaharta, son of king Pinedjem, issued a dispatch to renew the burial of this god (nṯr) by the treasure scribe and temple scribe Penamon…”

The use of a single term for both a supernatural being and a dead body may seem odd, but it was normal in ancient Egypt, as well as elsewhere in the ancient Near East. After noting that “The Egyptians often called kings and dead persons gods (nṯrw) in express terms,” Herman te Velde adds that “the meaning of the Egyptian word we are accustomed to render as ‘god’ (nṯr) includes god revealed in symbols, but also extends to the symbols that reveal the god.” Certainly those symbols included the physical remains of the king, which are precisely what is in view in the Isaiah passage. A Roman Period lexical papyrus makes the connection to the corpse quite explicit, defining nṯr as “that which is buried.”

The expression “god” and “(divinized) royal corpse” in Isaiah 14:19

In the context of Isaiah 14, the play on a word for a divinized royal corpse is quite natural. The prophet has just described the tyrant as one who says:

I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God;
I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon;
I will ascend to the tops of the clouds,
I will make myself like the Most High.” (Isa 14:13-14)

The taunt-song thus plays on both the positive and negative aspects of nṯr/nṯr to subvert the monarch’s hope for a divinized afterlife, just as it does numerous other aspects of afterlife expectation, such as those for mourning and burial.

The presence of the modifying word τύπος in the text favors the interpretation of τύπος as “divinized royal corpse.” The root והיר, related to the much more common noun זכרון, “abomination,” has a very strong negative meaning. It is reserved for some of the sternest warnings in biblical law. A term such as “miscarried fetus” or “flesh from a corpse” would not really need to be described as “abhorrent,” because they would have been viewed that way inherently. By contrast, a term such as nṯr, which normally carries a strong positive connotation, requires an equally strong negative modifier to bring it in line with the mocking tone of taunt-song: “Oh yes, you’ve become a ‘god’ ... an abominated/rejected god.”

Von Rad suggested that the Niphal of והיר meant “to treat as ritually unclean,” and although והיר and קבר are not used specifically of dead bodies, it is of course the case that dead bodies were ritually unclean (Lev 11:31-32; 21:1, etc.). Thus the use of והיר is all the more understandable: a corpse could indeed be called “a ritually impure god.”

There are certain objections that could be raised against this theory. The first is that it makes no sense for Isaiah to use an Egyptian loanword in speaking of a Mesopotamian ruler. But in the linguistic crossroads at which Isaiah lived, it does not seem to have been much more odd for him to hybridize cultural references than it is for us today. A very similar example is 19:3, where it is widely accepted that an Akkadian loanword is used in a text about the Egyptians: “The spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out, and I will confound their plans; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead (יודר=Akk. ʾittimu) and the ghosts and the familiar spirits.”

Second, one might object that a wordplay requiring awareness of an Egyptian word is so esoteric as to strain credulity. Then again, nṯr is an exceedingly common Egyptian noun, and perhaps one of the ones that a Judean prophet and court would be most likely to know. Furthermore, one can cite multiple other instances of bilingual wordplays in Isaiah (e.g. 10:8; 28:15, 18) and elsewhere in the Bible. One need not even assume that the biblical author’s (or prophet’s) audience would have understood the reference, although I think many would have. As Morrow rightly warns about a different passage:

In the pre-exilic period, [proto-biblical literature] was the province of a small, educated elite. Only a rather select group would have appreciated the bilingual pun ... But the insertion of such abstruse knowledge is hardly exceptional in ancient Near Eastern scribal practice. There are many examples in Mesopotamian literature of obscure references that would only make sense to the especially learned.
It is particularly unsurprising to find esoteric wordplay in Isaiah; he is notorious for it. Not only is he never portrayed as speaking to the masses, if anything he is portrayed as a difficult and mysterious figure who is hard to understand (Isa 6:9).

One should ask, in light of the recognition of נזר as "royal corpses" in 14:19, whether the similar terms נצרי/نزורי that appear in Isa 49:6 and 65:4 are also related to Egyptian nfr. In both cases, the context is amenable to a word for a corpse that was perceived by some as divinized. With this understanding, Isa 65:4 condemns "those who sit in graves and spent the night among corpses" (יוֹלֶנֶים בְּקָבֵרֵי תּוֹרָו). It is indeed preferable to avoid the lectio facilior emendation ובְּקָבֵרֵי תּוֹרָו ("and between the rocks they spend the night"), which is not supported by any Hebrew manuscript—even though that was also the best that LXX translator could do with the rare word (ἐν καταστασίαις νεκρῶν). Better to preserve the parallelism (graves/corpses) without emending the text at all.44

If it is correct to preserve the MT and understand נצרי as "corpses," then the word has perhaps lost its royal associations in this late period. That would be unsurprising from an Egyptianological perspective, since the "democratization of death"—the process in which aspirations of a divinized afterlife spread from kings to a wider populace—was nearly complete by the late period. Interestingly, 1QIsa reads נְצוּרֵי instead of נצרי both here and in 65:4, which affirms the intertextual connection while complicating the interpretation. (Not surprisingly, the more conservative 1QIsa scroll matches the MT at 49:6; it is not preserved for 65:4.) In both 49:6 and 65:4, the forms from נצרי can be read as "corpses," but "protected ones" does not work in both places—it makes little sense in 65:4—so the decision to level the spelling of the two occurrences seems to reflect a scribal preference to read both as referring to the dead.

The Deir 'Alla plaster inscription has proved an extremely difficult text to interpret, largely because of its broken condition. This is especially true of Combination II, where the term nfr appears. Suffice it to note here that there appear to be references to "crossing over to the House of Eternity, the house from which the traveler does not rise" (II.6-7) to "a worm from a tomb" (II.8) to graves (II.8), to an "eternal bed" where someone perishes (II.11), and to death itself (II.13). In short, however one reconstructs the narrative and purpose of Combination II, there could scarcely be a context more amenable to a term referring to the divinized dead. Of course, Levine has already translated and explained the text on the basis of the idea that nfr means "corpses," and I will not attempt to improve on his interpretation of the narrative.14 I have only suggested a different derivation of nfr, a derivation that does a better job of explaining why the tribes of Jacob and restore the corpses of Israel"—the Hiphil of רָשַׁל can express physical renewal (2 Sam 8:3; Dan 9:25; Ps 80:4, 8, 20) that would work well with the preceding use of רָשַׁל, with its echoes of revivification (Amos 5:2; Hos 6:2). The author’s postponement of the verb רָשַׁל until the end of the phrase (על־זיווֹרָו פלָשְׁתִּים נזרי) does nothing to discourage the hearer from hearing, "raise up the tribes of Jacob and the corpses of Israel." (This is of course a normal, chiastic word order in poetry; I mean to describe only a possible effect in the ear of the hearer.)

Imagery of raising the dead was fairly widely used to portray the restoration of the people—not only in famous passages such as Ezek 37, Isa 26:19, and Hos 6:2,20 but also in this same section of Isaiah—cf. Isa 41:11b-14 ("Do not fear; I will help you. Do not fear, worm of Jacob, dead31 of Israel! I will help you," says the Lord") and Isa 52:2 ("Shake yourself from the dust, rise up [רש], O captive Jerusalem!"). Given how common wordplay is in Isaiah, it is not a great stretch to imagine that 49:6 could have been another play on the same motif.

The nfr in Deir 'Alla II.I, 12, 14

Nouns from Nfr in Isaiah 65:4 and 49:6

The root נfr is more common in the postexilic period without a monarchy to support it. Although the process in which aspirations of a divinized afterlife spread from kings to a wider populace— was nearly complete by the late period. Interestingly, 1QIsa reads נְצוּרֵי instead of נצרי both here and in 65:4, which affirms the intertextual connection while complicating the interpretation. (Not surprisingly, the more conservative 1QIsa scroll matches the MT at 49:6; it is not preserved for 65:4.) In both 49:6 and 65:4, the forms from נצרי can be read as "corpses," but "protected ones" does not work in both places—it makes little sense in 65:4—so the decision to level the spelling of the two occurrences seems to reflect a scribal preference to read both as referring to the dead.

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corpus should be capable of action such as a “sighing in its heart” (II.13)—because it is divinized, rather than simply being “flesh from a corpse which has become detached” (§22, see above)

PHONOLOGY

As reflected by the earlier studies treating Heb. וָי and Aram. וָי, together, the equivalence of Heb. ו and Aram. ו—both deriving from Proto-Semitic *d (sometimes written as *ḏ or *ṣ)—is well established (e.g., Heb. שֹׁ / Old Aramaic šq / Arabic ṣd, all meaning “land, earth”). It remains to be argued that the Egyptian letter ṣ had a similar phonetic value to PS *d. It may be objected that the equivalence of Eg. Ɽ with Heb. ṣ is not the norm, but the correspondence usually thought to be normal (Eg. Ɽ := Heb. ṣ) turns out to be based on slim data. Since the correspondence Eg. Ɽ := Semitic Ⱪ is normal in Phoenician during the same period, and since both were voiceless affricates of similar articulation, it is quite possible in Hebrew as well.

In earlier periods, Eg. Ɽ had a complex reception in Semitic languages. It is sometimes stated that Eg. Ɽ was equated with Semitic Ⱪ (i.e., samekh). However, in the Old Kingdom, it seems to have been equated with Semitic Ⱪ, Ⱪ, and Ⱪ, and in the New Kingdom it was equated with Semitic Ⱪ as well as Ⱪ and Ⱪ. Correspondences between Eg. Ɽ and Semitic Ⱪ during the New Kingdom include the loanword Ⱪ-דע- נ (game, venison) in a Dynasty 19 papyrus, from the same Semitic base as Heb. נטר, in Phoenician, and the more common Eg. קים (charioteer), comparable with Heb. קים [e.g., Josh 10:24; Jdg 11:6].

In any case, the earlier (and better attested) correspondences of Eg. Ɽ in the OK and NK do not bear directly on the later reception of Egyptian words by the first-millennium Hebrew prophets. Around the middle of the first millennium, samekh itself changed in pronunciation, becoming a sibilant. Eg. Ⱪ is not a sibilant, and so in the first-millennium NW Semitic languages, it was re-interpreted in various ways: for example, it turns into Ⱪ in Phoenician, but into Ⱪ in Aramaic. The harder one looks at the data, the less absolute these equivalences appear. For example, Eg. Ɽ may also correspond also to Phoenician ו. And the Aramaic situation is particularly diverse: in the fifth century, Eg. Ɽ could correspond to ו, Ⱪ, and Ⱪ, and even Ⱪ has been proposed. Thus, when it is reported that Eg. Ɽ became Ⱪ in Hebrew, as it usually is, one has cause for suspicion. Indeed, the usual interpretation for this is that Eg. Ɽ > Heb. מ Modern. It is not as straightforward as the primary consideration” when identifying loanwords, and the phonological argument is thus significant but not determinative.

CONCLUSION

In sum, one has in Eg. מ a plausible explanation for ו in Isa 14:19 and ו in 65:4, both of which have thus far defied positive explanation. In Isa 14 it is perfectly suited to mock the king’s divine aspirations; it commonly refers to the deceased king and to the mumified corpse in Egyptian; it requires a strong negative modifier such as מ and it is no great stretch to think that Isaiah knew such common Egyptian vocabulary. In Isa 65:4 it avoids an emendation and reveals a far better parallelism (graves/corpses) than other proposed solutions. Isaiah 49:6 has long been understood to employ the same word as 65:4, and it may well reflect an intentional wordplay on the meanings “returning the survivors” and “restoring the corpses.” Finally, a reference to a divinized dead person in Deir ‘Alla II.5, 12, 14 makes better sense in the context than a word related to “detached flesh.” From a broader perspective, the field of biblical studies is still only beginning to grasp the impact that Egyptian
culture had on the Bible, particularly in the second quarter of first millennium BCE; it is not surprising to find another Egyptian loanword in Isaiah.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank Kathryn M. Cooney, Jeremy M. Harton, W. Randall Garr, Joel M. LeMon, and the anonymous JAIE reviewers for reading and commenting on drafts of this article.

2 Donald B. Redford has written that it is "between 725 and 525 B.C." that one might best look for Egyptian influence on Judah. See Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992), 365. Iconographic studies indicate that Judahite crafts during the Iron II era (ca. 925–725) give "evidence of an intense fascination with Egyptian power symbols"—Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 266.


4 "Loanword" is used as a generic term here. One may wish to distinguish between loanwords, Fremdwörter, and Fremdkulturen; distinctions that Paul V. Mankowski helpfully discusses in Akkadische Loanwörter in Biblical Hebrew (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 7. The noun clearly has Egyptian origins and thus cannot be understood as a Kulturwörter. And Mankowski himself notes that when one has only a small number of occurrences it is difficult to distinguish between loanwords (which are almost totally assimilated into the target language) and words that remain subjectively foreign. That caveat certainly applies to skr.


6 See also idem and their placement in: An Egyptian Etymology for Hebrew ȝbwt. — Blenkinsopp adopts the same translation as the NRSV but then also notes the LXX’s Ἐσεκόχ and the idea of emending to Ἐσεκ—e.g. a non-resolution characteristic of work on the word.

7 Hackett, The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Alla Re-Evaluated, 78.


12 Robert K. Ritner, The Libyan Anarchy (SBLAWW 21; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 116. The "renewal" (wḥm) of royal burials entailed the re-wrapping of mummies and their placement in a different "cache." While this was presented as a pious act of "re-Osirification," it appears that it was motivated also by a desire to get access to the riches of the tombs.

13 The best-known example among scholars of Semitic religions is sībīnīpī, which came to mean both "soul" and "monument." I have also argued that Heb. ‘aḥōl and Eg. ḥeḥēt are further examples of the same thing. See Christopher B. Hays and Joel M. LeMon, "The Dead and Their Images: An Egyptian Etymology for Hebrew ‘aḥōl," JAIE 1 (2009): 1–4.


17 The instances of the verb ʾnḥb in Job 19:19 and 30:10 occur in close proximity to language of suffering and death, but these are not legal or culitic passages.
In a general sense, the level of intercultural religious awareness in the ancient Near East is demonstrated by the recent study of Mark S. Smith: *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (FAT 57; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008). Iramar Singer has written that during the Hittite Empire, "a basic knowledge of foreign pantheons was not just an intellectual asset of Hittite theologians, but rather an essential requirement for the Hittite 'Foreign Office.'" Iramar Singer, *"The Thousand Gods of Hatti": The Limits of an Expanding Pantheon"* in *Concepts of the Other in Near Eastern Religions*, eds. I. Alon, I. Gruenwald and I. Singer (IOS 14; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 93. It seems to me that many scribes and religious experts in Iron Age Israel and Judah would have needed a similar level of cross-cultural expertise.

On Isa 28:15, 18, see Christopher B. Hays, *The Covenant with Mum: A New Interpretation of Isaiah 28:1-22,* *JT* 60 (2010): 212-40. For other examples, see Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image," 734–5; Gary A. Rendsburg, "Bilingual Wordplay in the Bible," *JT* 38 (1988): 354–56. Notably, the word מָצַר is used in the sense of "shoot" (figuratively: "scion, heir") in Isa 11:1. Neither sense appears to have been particularly common, so there may have been a double entendre in 14:19.


Reading מָנָה with 1QIsa.

Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II and in First Isaiah,* 359-60.


James E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1991). 454. Note also the proposed phonetic value [x] for ṣ in p. 613. Hoch acknowledges that this is an unusual case, but perhaps it is not as unusual as previously thought. The more usual case is that Heb. ṣ was rendered by Eg ḫ.

W. F. Albright, *The Vocalization of the Egyptian Syllabic Orthography* (New Haven, Conn., American Oriental Society, 1934), 61. Cf. Leonard H. Lesko, *A Dictionary of Akkadian nṣr II*, *JT* 26 [1976]: 433-35. While this is an intriguing suggestion that could also supply a mortuary parallelism, the new roots they propose have not been widely accepted, nor adopted into standard lexica such as CAD and HALOT (although the Ugaritic occurrence has been analyzed as he suggested by DULAT, on the strength of its occurrence in parallel with b-k-y). In the biblical instances, Healey’s proposal does not convince this reader.

The democratization of death is summarized in Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II and in First Isaiah,* 74-76.

For example, Yoshiyuki Muchiki cites as a possibility Ph. שַׁמוֹ (Eg. šm), where Eg. t > Ph. š. See Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic (SBLDS 173; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 41-42.

Muchiki posits Aram. רַב (Eg. dl(e) q(t) (“Saris has given,” 88) and Aram. רַבִּים < Eg. p(ȝ)(i)-t(m)-w (“He whom the gods has given,” 118, cf. Eg. w.g; 117; Aram. 130; Num. 137; 138; 139: cf. 172; 174), where Eg. t > Aram. r. For Eg. t > Aram. s, see the proposal cited but not accepted by Muchiki that Aram. רַב < Eg. w.t (“My provision is god, the living one”), but this is a very contested issue (see Muchiki, 224-26) and should not be used as settled data.

Antonio Loprieno, “Egyptian and Coptic,” in Roger D. Woodard, ed., The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World’s Ancient Languages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 163. He offers /č h/ as a vocalization; the reader will recognize that the correspondence to the usual pronunciation of affricated š is close (esp. in the phonological environment of the word neser), albeit not exact.


Carsten Peust, Egyptian Phonology: An Introduction to the Phonology of a Dead Language (Monographien zur Ägyptischen Sprache 2; Göttingen: Peust & Gutschmidt Verlag, 1999), 79-84, 123-25. Regarding the change t > ṣ, Peust writes that even the best of earlier attempts to explain the shift “seems complicated and unnatural and does not makes predictions for all environments. However, I cannot make a better proposal.”


We note again the various ways Eg. š was received in Semitic languages in various periods in Steiner, Early Northwest Semitic Serpent Spells, 59-60; there are also examples of biforms within a single language given in Hoch, “Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts,” 15-16.


Guti, Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, esp. 23-30.

Muchiki, Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic, 232-33, and see further literature cited in HALOT. It has been argued that Joseph’s Egyptian name  גֵּרֵשׁ-פָּנְא (Gen 41:45) reflects Egyptian ḏī(w)pī(p)-p(ȝ)(i)-nḥ (“My provision is god, the living one”), but this is a very contested issue (see Muchiki, 224-26) and should not be used as settled data.