



CRITICAL REMARKS ON A PROPOSED ETYMOLOGY OF HEBREW נצר AND ARAMAIC nqr

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Recently, Christopher B. Hays has proposed to explain the Hebrew word *nšr* attested twice in the Book of Isaiah and a possibly related word *nkr* in the Bile'am text from Tell Deir Allah as a loanword derived from Egyptian *nčr* "god" in the sense of a corpse.¹ The aim of the following remarks is to show that this proposal is not possible for semantic as well as (particularly compelling) phonetic reasons.

Concerning the semantic side, Hays' argument relies overmuch on a quite problematic article by Hans Goedicke.² E.g. Goedicke refers to PT 465 b as a passage "where *h^c m ntr-č³* is used in reference to the establishing of the deceased as ritually buried dead".⁴ As a matter of fact, the passage in question tells that Horus causes his father Osiris (mentioned by name in PT 664 b) to appear as a great god. Obviously, this concerns gods and not just any deceased. While, under certain conditions, entities which we might designate as corpses (e.g. a correctly mummified and ritually treated dead king) can be designated as *nčr* in Egyptian texts,⁵ *nčr* is by no means a term whose connotation as "corpse" would be so obvious and so frequent in its usage to make it a plausible candidate for linguistic borrowing.

Hays' claim that "A Roman Period lexical papyrus makes the connection to the corpse quite explicit, defining *ntr* as 'that which is buried'"⁶ is also not well founded. Hays was apparently working from a secondary source without checking the original. The text in question, the "sign-papyrus" from Tanis⁷ is, as a matter of fact, not defining words, but describing signs. It says, concerning the sign ¹ [...] *lw=f krs* "a [...] which is wrapped in cloth".⁸ This is, in itself, not seriously different from the description of the sign in the modern sign list of Egyptologists, e.g. A.H. Gardiner describes it as "cloth wound on a pole".⁹ It clearly does not constitute proof that the word *nčr* means primarily "corpse".

However, the most serious criticism must be voiced against the supposed phonetic correspondences. Firstly, if the word *nšr* in Isaiah and the *nkr* in the Bile'am text are really to be connected, that would point to an original Semitic emphatic lateral sound *ḏ* (or more precisely to be notated as *ṣ*).¹⁰ This quite specific sound does not exist in Egyptian and there is no shred of evidence that

this sound was ever used in a Semitic language for rendering Egyptian *č*. This factor alone might cause serious doubt regarding Hays' proposal.

Indeed, without focusing on the specific lateral sound, Hays tries to prove at least that Hebrew *š* is a possible rendering of Egyptian *č*. However, his arguments do not withstand close scrutiny. First, he relies on Richard C. Steiner for claiming that in the Old Kingdom Egyptian *č* could correspond to Semitic *t*, *ṭ*, and *d*.¹¹ However, Steiner's recent work can hardly be said to have been accepted as definite by Egyptologists,¹² and indeed the very substantial leeway proposed by Steiner where all the Semitic dentals *t*, *ṭ*, and *d* are supposed to be rendered indiscriminately by Egyptian *t* as well as *č*¹³ is in itself a serious indicator that something is amiss. In any case, even Steiner's claims do not cover a correspondence between Egyptian *č* and Semitic *š*. However, since everybody agrees that some sound-shifts occurred in Egyptian after the end of the Old Kingdom, the later phases are of more direct relevance concerning the possibility of the equation proposed by Hays.

For the New Kingdom,¹⁴ Hays claims two cases of a correspondence between Egyptian *č* and Semitic *š*. The first one concerns a hapax legomenon *čl'* of quite uncertain meaning occurring only in pSallier IV vs.3, 2. Hoch had proposed to understand it as "venison" based on an etymological connection to Hebrew *šayid* "game".¹⁵ However, he marked this equation with only a grade 2 (dubious) which should exclude it as a solid basis for further hypotheses. Indeed, much can be said against it. Not only is the rendering of Semitic *š* by Egyptian *č* quite irregular, but also the Semitic word is *mediae infirm* and has nothing which would correspond to the final glottal stop clearly indicated in the Egyptian writing. The equation by Hoch has not been accepted in the last philological study of the passage in question.¹⁶ In short, this word cannot serve to demonstrate Hays' point.

As a second case, Hays cited the Egyptian word *kčn/kčn* "charioteer" which he wants to link with Hebrew *qāšim*.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, Hoch has discussed that word as well and pointed out that "the similarity of *qš* to the word for 'charioteer' is only

coincidental”.¹⁸ Indeed, the array of Semitic attestations for “charioteer” (mainly in Akkadian and Ugaritic) shows clearly that the word is to be reconstructed as *kzy* (as it is attested in Ugaritic whose writing system distinguishes more unequivocally between voiced and voiceless consonants than second millennium Akkadian). The fluctuation between Egyptian *č* and *ĉ* for rendering the voiced sibilant is quite typical.¹⁹ Thus, we have to reject Hays’ claim in this regard and to note that there is no single case from the third and second millennia BCE where Egyptian *č* ever corresponds to Semitic *š*.

For the first millennium BCE, Hays says concerning the Egyptian *č* “The harder one looks at the data, the less absolute these equivalences appear.”²⁰ Actually, most of the supposed chaos in the renderings is due to the simple fact that Egyptian *č* developed into *t* around the turn of the third millennium in most cases but remained stable in some; and that obviously means that there will be two basically different renderings in Semitic languages, one of them being for words where it has shifted to *t*.

There are at least two quite clear cases where Egyptian *č* is rendered by *š* in Phoenician in Achaemenid-period jar inscriptions from Egypt.²¹ They can probably be explained by the fact that in Phoenician, the emphatic sibilant (but not the voiced or voiceless) retained its affricate pronunciation. There is one possible case of rendering it by *š*, but that comes from a late Punic text (CIS I. 2760, 3; 5255, 1),²² and besides the reading of the first and crucial letter is considered to be uncertain. In Aramaic (where also the emphatic *š* did not maintain its status as affricate sound), the normal rendering of Egyptian *č* (where it has not changed into *t*) is certainly *š*.²³ There is no certain attestation of a rendering of Egyptian *č* as *š*, and the only case adduced for it (a name *šn*)²⁴ cannot count because firstly, the reading of the supposed *š* is problematic (the sign is read as *k* by Porten and Yardeni),²⁵ and secondly the alleged Egyptian correspondence *čni* no longer exists in the Late Period.

Summing this up, the correspondence between Egyptian *č* and Semitic *š* proposed by Hays is impossible before the first millennium BCE, but afterwards it would be possible if Hebrew behaved similar to Phoenician. However, the form *nkr* in the Bile’am inscription does not fit in at all. If the word of the Bile’am inscription is really etymologically related to Hebrew *nšr*, we have to postulate an original sound *š* (emphatic lateral), and that is never attested as a rendering of an Egyptian sound.

Even more seriously, another point touched lightly above has to be given more consideration, namely the inner-Egyptian phonetic developments. As it is well known, in most positions Egyptian *č* developed into *t*.²⁶ Furthermore, word-final *r* would be first reduced to *l* and later dropped altogether in pronunciation.²⁷

Both rules are potentially applicable for the word *nčr* “god”. How does the actual evidence stand?

“Cryptographic” renderings of the word “god” in New Kingdom manuscripts write $\overline{=}$ ¹, thus clearly showing at least the weakening of the final *r* (the phonetic status of the sign $\overline{=}$ is ambiguous in the New Kingdom).²⁸ Already in the later second millennium BCE, there are cuneiform renderings of the title *pš-ḥm-nčr* as *pa-ḥa-am-na-ta*, with a variant *pa-ḥa-na-ta*.²⁹ This shows that the word *nčr* “god” was rendered in Akkadian cuneiform as *nata*. The Egyptian expression *ḥm-nčr*, which occurs here in a personal name, is also a regular title for “servant of god, prophet”. This title is also attested as a loanword in Meroitic in the form *An(na)t(a)*.³⁰ Egyptian loanwords in Meroitic regularly display the phonetic state of Egyptian during the New Kingdom (when they were actually being taken over).³¹

In imperial Aramaic, we have the rendering *pšḥmšnwty* for *pš šḥḥ mčš.t-nčr* “the scribe of the god’s book”,³² which leaves *nwty* as phonetic rendering of Egyptian *nčr* “god”. The *w* is easily explained, as this is rendering Egyptian *ū* into which original *ā* developed in the early first millennium after the consonants *n* or *m*.³³

Late period hieroglyphic writings of “god” can be reduced to $\overline{=}$ ², thus showing the true phonetic shape as *nt*, with change of *č* into *t* as well as the loss of the final *r*.³⁴ Finally, there is Coptic **ΝΟΥΤΕ** as well as Greek renderings of the word as $\nu\theta\iota$.³⁵ All this fits together very well. An original Egyptian form *nāčr* became *nāt’i* (by the New Kingdom) and later *nūtē/ nūti*, and this is also well reflected in an Aramaic transcription of the Persian period.

With some probability, also Joseph’s Egyptian name *šāpnat paneah* (Genesis 41, 45) is relevant, if it is to be understood as *čt-pš-nčr-ḥw=f-čnh* “The god has said that he lives”, although, given that there has been some debate about its etymology and different etymologies have been proposed,³⁶ I refrain here from adducing it as evidence. If the etymology is correct, the rendering of Egyptian *nčr* as *nat* would be one more point against Hays, if it is irrelevant other ones remain.






All the evidence assembled here shows with overwhelming clarity that in the Egyptian word “god” the original *č* shifted to *t*, and that the final *r* was weakened, and thus Hebrew *nšr* can on no account be derived from it. For Aramaic, we even have the positive attestation of a rendering of Egyptian *nčr* (in a compound) which is highly divergent from the *nkr* in the Bileam-inscription with which Hays wants to connect it. In conclusion, Christopher B. Hays’ proposal to derive the Hebrew word *nšr* from the Egyptian *nčr* can be safely rejected.

NOTES

¹ Christopher B. Hays, “An Egyptian Loanword in the Book of Isaiah and the Deir ‘Alla Inscription: Heb. *nšr*, Aram. *nqr*, and Eg. *ntr* as [Divinized] Corpse,” *JAET* 4 (2012): 17-23.

² Hans Goedicke, “The Beginning of the Instruction of King Amenemhet,” *JARCE* 7 (1968): 15-21, there p. 20.

³ The adjective $\overline{=}$ ³ is dropped in Hays’ citation of Goedicke’s text (Hays, *JAET* 4: 18).

- ⁴ Goedicke, 1968, 20.
- ⁵ E.g., in the embalming ritual, the corpse which is treated is consistently referred to as *nṣr pn* “this god”, see the edition by Serge Sauneron, *Rituel de l’Embaumement. Pap. Boulaq III, Pap. Louvre 5.158* (Cairo: Imprimerie Nationale, 1952).
- ⁶ Hays, *JAEl* 4: 18.
- ⁷ Edition in Francis Llewelyn Griffith and William Matthew Flinders Petrie, *Two Hieroglyphic Papyri from Tanis* (London 1889), pl. I-VIII; for the passage in question, see p. 16 pl. III-IV. Hays relies on Françoise Dunand and Christiane Zivie-Coche, *Gods and Men in Egypt: 3000 BCE to 395 CE* (translated by David Lorton; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 8, which in turn is based on Erik Hornung, *Der Eine und die Vielen. Ägyptische Gottesvorstellungen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971), 22f.
- ⁸ In Joachim Friedrich Quack, “Der Schlußparagraph des Buches vom Atmen, das Isis machte,” *WdO* 39 (2009): 72-76; p. 73f. with note 6, I have explained that there has to be restituted a noun lost in a lacuna at the beginning of the line, and that *krs* here means “to wrap in cloth”, not simply “to bury”.
- ⁹ Alan Henderson Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs*. Third Edition, revised (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957), 502.
- ¹⁰ This is indeed admitted openly by Hays, *JAEl* 4: 20.
- ¹¹ Richard C. Steiner, *Early Northwest Semitic Serpent Spells in the Pyramid Texts*, Harvard Semitic Studies 61 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011).
- ¹² See a presentation of different possible approaches by Gunnar Sperveslage, “Zu den Schlangensprüchen in den Pyramidentexten,” *Sokar* 23 (2011): 31-37 and the very critical remarks by Francis Breyer, “Zu den angeblich semitischen Schlangensprüchen der Pyramidentexte,” *OLZ* 107 (2012): 141-146, as well as the detailed criticism of his supposed order of reading the spells in Harold Hays, *The Organization of the Pyramid Texts. Typology and Disposition*, PÄ 31 (Leiden/Boston: Brill 2012), 276-279. In a paper which Harold Hays and I are preparing together, we will show that there are not only phonetic but also semantic problems with Steiner’s approach and that it does not do justice to the actual sequence of the texts as attested in the different pyramids.
- ¹³ Steiner, 2011, 60.
- ¹⁴ Hays (*JAEl* 4) does not say anything about the Middle Kingdom, and to my knowledge there is no evidence from it which would support his thesis.
- ¹⁵ James E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 374.
- ¹⁶ Nikolaus Tacke, *Verspunte als Gliederungsmittel in ramessidischen Schülerhandschriften*, SAGA 22 (Heidelberg: Orientverlag, 2001), 81, note dd.
- ¹⁷ Hays, *JAEl* 4: 20.
- ¹⁸ Hoch, 1994, 345 note 137.
- ¹⁹ Joachim Friedrich Quack, *ZDMG* 146 (1996): 513.
- ²⁰ Hays, *JAEl* 4: 20.
- ²¹ Yoshiyuki Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 41. For another possible case, see my remarks in the review of Muchiki, *Review of Biblical Literature* (2000), www.bookreviews.org/pdf/408_983.pdf, there concerning p. 144.
- ²² Muchiki, 1999, 42.
- ²³ Muchiki, 1999, 185.
- ²⁴ Muchiki, 1999, 140.
- ²⁵ Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt Newly Copied, Edited and Translated into Hebrew and English 3. Literature, Accounts, Lists* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1993), 80. Neither *k* nor *ṣ* is attested elsewhere in the same fragment for comparison.
- ²⁶ Carsten Peust, *Egyptian Phonology. An Introduction to the Phonology of a Dead Language* (Göttingen: Peust & Gutschmidt, 1999), 123-125.
- ²⁷ Peust, 1999, 151-156.
- ²⁸ John Coleman Darnell, *The Enigmatic Netherworld Books of the Solar-Osirian Unity. Cryptographic Compositions in the Tombs of Tutankhamun, Ramesses VI, and Ramesses IX*, OBO 198 (Freiburg/Göttingen: Academic Press Fribourg/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 166.
- ²⁹ Jørgen Alexander Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna-Tafeln mit Einleitung und Erläuterungen, Zweiter Teil. Anmerkungen und Register* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1915), 1566 with a list of the actual attestations; Hermann Ranke, *Keilschriftliches Material zur altägyptischen Vokalisation* (Berlin: Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1910), 15; Wolfgang Schenkel, *Einführung in die altägyptische Sprachwissenschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990), 82f.
- ³⁰ Fritz Hintze, “Some Problems of Meroitic Philology,” in: Fritz Hintze (ed.), *Sudan im Altertum. I. Internationale Tagung für meroitische Forschungen in Berlin 1971*. Meroitica 1 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), 321-336, there p. 332.
- ³¹ Schenkel, 1990, 62.
- ³² Karl-Theodor Zauzich, “Ägyptologische Bemerkungen zu den neuen aramäischen Papyri aus Saqqara,” *Enchoria* 13 (1985): 115-118, there p. 116; Muchiki, 1999, 170f.
- ³³ Peust, 1999, 238f.
- ³⁴ Herman de Meulenaere, “*Nl(r)* et *ns(r)*,” in: Catherine Berger, Gisèle Clerc, and Nicolas Grimal (eds.), *Hommages à Jean Leclant*, volume 4. *Varia*, BdÉ 106/4 (Cairo: IFAO, 1994), 65-71, there p. 66-69. As further examples from the Ptolemaic period (from papyri as well as temple inscriptions) I can add  (pSchmitt 10, 12),  (pMMA 35.9.21, 40, 8; 48, 8; Edfou I, 209, 12; 211, 14),  (Edfu I, 220, 7), and  (Edfou I, 221, 14; 211, 17). The fact that in late phonetic spellings of the words, in the singular the final *r* is consistently omitted also shows that the proposal of Daniel von Recklinghausen, “Ägyptische Quellen zum Judentum,” *ZÄS* 132 (2005): 147-160, there p. 151f. to understand a writing  in the Satrap stela (Urk.

II, 15, 14) as a singular “god” (and interpret the singular as indicating Jewish religion), accepted in Donata Schäfer, *Makedonische Pharaonn und hieroglyphische Stelen. Historische Untersuchungen zur Satrapenstele und verwandten Denkmälern* (Leuven/Paris/Walpole, MA: Peeters 2011), 113-115 is not possible; if the word is really to be understood as being related to *nĕr* “god” (which is not certain), it has to be the plural form.

³⁵ For the question of Greek-script renderings in magical papyri as well as unetymological demotic Egyptian writings

derived from them, see Joachim Friedrich Quack, “Griechische und andere Dämonen in den demotischen magischen Texten,” in: Thomas Schneider (ed.), *Das Ägyptische und die Sprachen Vorderasiens, Nordafrikas und der Ägäis. Akten des Basler Kolloquiums zum ägyptisch-nichtsemitischen Sprachkontakt Basel 9.-11. Juli 2003*, AOAT 310 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2004), 427-507, there p. 450.

³⁶ See Muchiki, 1999, 224-226; and Quack, 2000, there concerning p. 224-226.