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JEWISH ATTITUDES TO BYZANTIUM'S TROUBLES?
 THE DEFINITION OF HEBREW *KAFTOR*
 IN THE CYRILLIC MANUSCRIPT MANUAL
 OF HEBREW (ACCORDING TO THE EXTANT
 SIXTEENTH-CENTURY COPY)

An East Slavic copy of *Miscellany*, written in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the third quarter of the 16th century (Moscow, Russian State Archive of Early Acts, F. Mazurin collection (f. 196), inventory 1, No 616, *in quarto*), contains a previously unknown text which can be called *Cyrillic manuscript manual of Hebrew* (on f. 124–130). Certain features show that this is a later (to a certain extent corrupted) copy of an earlier original which can be tentatively dated back to the second half of the 15th century¹.

The manual is a result of joint efforts of Jewish and East Slavic bookmen, although designed for a Christian audience. It comprises material of three different kinds: a) Hebrew texts written in Cyrillic (Gen 2.8, 32.27–28; Ps 150; So 3.4 (or 8.2), 8.5; Is 11.12)²; b) a bilingual

¹ The text has been published with a general characteristic: Сергей Юрьевич Темчин, “Кириллический рукописный учебник древнееврейского языка (XVI в.): публикация и общая характеристика памятника”, in: *Naujausi kalbų ir kultūrų tyrimai*, eds. Violeta Meiliūnaitė, Nadiežda Morozova, Vilnius: Europos kalbų ir kultūrų dialogo tyrėjų asociacija, 2012, pp. 137–180. The teaching methods applied in this manual have been analyzed in: Сергей Юрьевич Темчин, “Кириллический рукописный учебник древнееврейского языка (список XVI в.) и его учебно-методические приемы”, in: *Slavistica Vilnensis 2013* (Kalbotyra 58 (2)): XV Международный съезд славистов (Минск, 20–27 августа 2013 г.). Доклады литовской делегации, Vilnius, 2013, pp. 7–33.

² For the Hebrew pronunciation reflected in these texts see Sergei Y. Temchin,

Hebrew-Ruthenian glossary with explanatory notes³; c) quotations from the Ruthenian translation of three Old Testament books (Genesis, Isaiah, Song of Songs) which illustrate certain entries of the Hebrew–Slavic glossary⁴.

On folio 125v, the bilingual Hebrew-Ruthenian glossary presents an interesting explanation of the Hebrew word *kaf̄tor*: **по ѿв’рейскій, каѡторъ; рѣше, на врѣхѡу лѣствицѣи въсходѣць прѣ двѣрьми стѣнѣнѣми** (“Caphtor in Hebrew is a small ascent on the top of stairs before the entrance hall door”. This means ‘threshold, sill’ (the top of door-steps).

Hebrew *kaf̄tor* is a polysemic word, described by Gesenius as having three meanings:

כַּפְתֹּר, כַּפְתֹּר

1. *capital* of pillar;
2. *knob* or bulb, ornament of the golden lamp-stand in Tabernacle;
3. prob. *Crete* (Cappadocia, certainly wrong; Cyprus, the cost of the Nile Delta; Philistines, originally pirates from SW coast of Asia Minor, and the Aegean islands);

“Learning Hebrew in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: Evidence from a 16th-century Cyrillic manuscript” (forthcoming).

³ One entry from this glossary (that which explains Hebrew ‘*almāh*’) has been analyzed in: Сергей Юрьевич Темчин, “Толкование др.-евр. ‘*almāh*’ в рукописном кириллическом учебнике древнееврейского языка (по списку XVI в.)”, in: *Беларуская кніга ў кантэксце сусветнай кніжнай культуры: вывучэнне і захаванне: зборнік навуковых артыкулаў*, [вып. 4], рэд. Марына Аляксандраўна Мажэйка, Мінск: Беларускі дзяржаўны ўніверсітэт культуры і мастацтваў, 2012 (XVIII Міжнародныя Кірыла-Мяфодзіеўскія чытанні, прысвечаныя Дням славянскага пісьменства і культуры “Кніга ў фарміраванні духоўнай культуры і дзяржаўнасці беларускага народа” (Мінск, 16–18 мая 2012 г.). У 2 т. Т. 2), pp. 64–73.

⁴ The quotations from the Song of Songs found in the Cyrillic manual of Hebrew follow the same Ruthenian translation as in the famous Vilnius Old Testament Florilegium known in a copy of early 16th-century (*Wróblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences*, f. 19-262), see Сергей Юрьевич Темчин, “Кириллический рукописный учебник древнееврейского языка (XVI в.) и Виленский ветхозаветный свод”, in: *Кныготыра*, 2011, т. 57, Vilnius, pp. 86–99.

כַּפֶּת רִי

only pl. as subst. *Cretans*.⁵

The second meaning (“knob or bulb”) does not have any relation to the definition given in the Cyrillic manual of Hebrew. The first one (“capital of pillar”) is thematically very close to, but not identical with the definition in question (“threshold, sill”). The third meaning (a place name) can also be implied, since the Cyrillic manuscript source presents the entry for Hebrew *kaftor* within the thematic group of words related to Egypt (where also Hebrew *par’oh* “pharaoh” and *Mizraim* “Egypt” are explained)⁶.

Let us examine in more detail the possibility to relate the definition of Hebrew *kaftor* presented in the Cyrillic source to the first and/or third meaning(s) of the word.

THE FIRST MEANING

The definition “a small ascent on the top of stairs before the entrance hall door” cannot be deduced from any Bible verse containing Hebrew *kaftor* and seems to be derived etymologically from *kaf-tor*, since Hebrew *kaf* means “palm of hand”, but also “sole of foot”, while *tor* means “plait”, but also “turn”⁷, which results in *kaf-tor* * “the turn point for the sole of foot”, in fact “threshold, sill”. In any case, the definition given in the Cyrillic manuscript corresponds to the meaning of the Hebrew words *miftān* (used in 1 Sam 5.4–5; Ezek 9.3; 10.4, 18; 46.2; 47.1; Zeph 1.9) and *saf* (used in 25 Bible verses)⁸, both meaning “threshold”.

⁵ William Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Boston etc.: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, The Riverside Press, 1906, p. 499.

⁶ Сергей Юрьевич Темчин, “Кириллический рукописный учебник древнееврейского языка (список XVI в.) и его учебно-методические приемы”, pp. 25–26.

⁷ William Gesenius, *op. cit.*, pp. 496–497, 1064.

⁸ Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible: Thesaurus of the language of the Bible, Hebrew and Aramaic Roots, Words, Proper Names, Phrases and Synonyms*, Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer Publishing House, 1990, p. 812.

THE THIRD MEANING

The Bible mentions Caphtor as a place name (Deut 2.23; Jer 47.4; Am 9.7) and the Caphtorites as its dwellers (Gen 10.14; Deut 2.23; 1 Chron 1.12). The place does not have a clear identification: “The location of Caphtor [...] is in dispute. Most scholars consider Caphtor to be the ancient name for Crete and the surrounding islands (cf. “islands” in LXX, Jer. 47:4). In Jeremiah 47:4 Caphtor is defined as an island. Furthermore, several verses place the origin of the Philistines among the Cretans (Ezek. 25:16; Zeph. 2:5), while elsewhere they are identified as coming from Caphtor. The descent of the Caphtorim from the Egyptians (Gen. 10:14) hints at the close relationship that existed between Egypt and Caphtor. [...] Those who reject the identification of Caphtor with Crete look for it on the southern coast of Asia Minor, near Cilicia, on the basis of the Septuagint and Targum Onkelos which use the name Cappadocia (Gr. Καπαδοκία) in place of Caphtor.”⁹ Recently, an attempt was made to (re)identify Caphtor with Cyprus¹⁰.

On the other hand, traditional Hebrew authors, like Saadiah Gaon (882–942), Benjamin of Tudela (second half of 12th c.), and Maimonides (1135–1204), place Caphtor in Egypt – at Caphutkia (also Capotakia, or Kapotakia) in the vicinity of Damietta (at the eastern edge of the Nile Delta near classical Pelusium)¹¹. Although this tradition may go back merely to the first six centuries CE¹², it does not contradict the Bible, where the Caphtorites are mentioned (in the Table of Nations: Gen 10.13–14; cf. 1 Chron 1.11–12) as descending from Mizraim (e.g. Egypt).

⁹ Bustanay Oded, “Caphtor”, in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, second edition, eds. Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum, vol. 4, Detroit etc.: Thomson Gale, Keter Publishing House, 2007, p. 445.

¹⁰ John Strange, *Caphtor/Keftiu: a New Investigation*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980.

¹¹ *The works of John Lightfoot*, ed. John Strype, vol. 2, London: Printed by William Rawlins, 1684, pp. 290–291; Norman Golb, “The topography of the Jews of Medieval Egypt [Part Two]”, in: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1974, vol. 33, no. 1, Chicago, p. 126.

¹² Norman Golb, “The topography of the Jews of Medieval Egypt [Part One]”, in: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1965, vol. 24, no. 3: Erich F. Schmidt Memorial Issue, Chicago, p. 270.

The Egyptian context of the entry for *kaftor* in the Cyrillic manual of Hebrew puts it in line with both the Bible and the Medieval Jewish tradition. It presents Hebrew *kaftor* not as a common noun (“capital of pillar”), but as a place name with an etymologically derived meaning “threshold”, which does not correspond to the real meaning of the word. This semantic disagreement can be also explained as a result of a later corruption of the primary text which might have associated the given definition with another Hebrew noun (*miftān* or *saf*), which was mechanically omitted by a later scribe, resulting in a secondary association of Hebrew *kaftor* with its present definition: *kaftor* [“capital of pillar”; *miftān* or *saf*] “a small ascent on the top of stairs before the entrance hall door”. Although the extant copy of the Cyrillic manual of Hebrew does have omissions of this kind (notably, in the same Egyptian thematic group, in the immediate textual vicinity to the entry for *kaftor*)¹³, this speculative guess would imply Hebrew *kaftor* not as a place name, but as a common noun and thus destroy the congruence of the thematic group of nouns thematically related to Egypt, clearly presented in the source, since neither Hebrew *miftān* nor *saf* have any direct Egyptian association (about certain indirect associations see below).

Thus, it is safer to consider the entry for Hebrew *kaftor* an original definition and not a result of a later corruption. But why was this word chosen to be explained in the Cyrillic manual of Hebrew?

Caphtor was considered the original place of two closely related nations, both descending from Mizraim “Egypt”: the Caphtorites and the Philistines (Gen 10.13–14). The Bible explicitly describes the Philistines as descendants from the *island of Caphtor* (Jer 47.4; cf. Am 9.7), probably Crete (Ezek 25.16; Zeph 2.5). This association is not accidental, since the Hebrew root *p-l-š* (the basis for the name of the Philistines) means “to divide, go through, penetrate”¹⁴, which well

¹³ See Сергей Юрьевич Темчин, “Кириллический рукописный учебник древнееврейского языка (список XVI в.) и его учебно-методические приемы”, pp. 16, 25.

¹⁴ Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, vol. 2, London–New York: Luzac & Co., G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1903, p. 1185.

corresponds to the biblical image of the Philistines as invaders. This is paralleled by the semantics of Hebrew *saf* which means “threshold, sill”, but it is also a personal name of a Philistine¹⁵.

Since the Philistines were much more important for the Hebrews in the biblical times than the Caphtorites, we can assume that Hebrew *kaftor* was relevant to the compilers of the Cyrillic manual first and foremost as the original place of the Philistines (Am 9.7).

The Bible contains a sole episode which implies the ethnic meaning of *kaftor* “son of Mizraim; the original place of the Philistines”, while explicitly using both Hebrew *kaf* “palm of hand” (relevant to the etymological interpretation of *kaftor* as a composite *kaf-tor* reflected in the Cyrillic source) and *miftān* “threshold” – in the description of the death of Dagon, the god of the Philistines, which occurred in front of the ark of the covenant, captured by the Philistines from the Hebrews in the battle of Eben-Ezer: “And when they [the Philistines – S.T.] arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord; and the head of Dagon and both the *palms* [*kafot*] of his hands lay cut off upon the *threshold* [*miftān*]; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon’s house, tread on the *threshold* of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day.” (1 Sam 5.4–5)

This episode suggests the paradoxical idea that Dagon, the national god of the Philistines who had originated from the place named *kaftor*, later ended up, with his head and his both hands (*kafot*) cut off, at another *kaftor* (= *miftān*), if we consider its etymologically reconstructed meaning “threshold, sill”, explicitly presented in the Cyrillic manual of Hebrew. In short, those who have come from Caphtor (the Philistines and their god Dagon) also ended at *kaftor* = *miftān*.

Another question is why the compilers of the Cyrillic manual of Hebrew, working presumably in the second half of the 15th century, were interested in the chronologically very distant story of the Philistines and their god Dagon? What kind of message did it have to convey to the target Christian audience? The possible answer is the following:

¹⁵ William Gesenius, *op. cit.*, p. 706.

Because it was understood as a parallel to the actual fate of the Byzantine Greeks.

There were at least three reasons to think so:

a) The biblical place name Caphtor, be it understood as linked to Crete or Cappadokia, could be associated by the compilers of the Cyrillic text solely with the Byzantine Greeks, since the Egyptian Caphutkia was no longer existent in the 15th century. We should not forget that both the Medieval Jews and the Byzantine Greeks had a strong tradition of modernizing and actualizing the meaning of traditional ethnic names to fit their own times.

b) The name of the Philistine god Dagon was traditionally understood as derived from Hebrew *dāg* “fish”¹⁶. In line with this popular (probably incorrect) explanation, Medieval Jewish writers described an ichthyomorphic image of Dagon, while debating which part of him was shaped as a fish¹⁷. In the 15th century, it could be easily associated with the Christian understanding of Greek *ἰχθύς* “fish” as the acronym for Jesus: *ΙΧΘΥΣ* = Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Saviour”. It is interesting to note that in the pseudo-epigraphic *Letter to the emperor Theophilos concerning the holy and venerable images*, ascribed to John of Damascus (actually, it is a secondary version of the *Letter of the three Oriental Orthodox patriarchs to the emperor Theophilos*, compiled in the 9th century), its iconodulic writer/editor accuses his iconoclastic opponents (allegedly influenced by the Jews) of considering Christ as Bel and Dagon (“[...] ὥς γὰρ τὸν Βήλ καὶ Δαγῶν τὸν Χριστὸν λογιζόμενοι, τούτου καὶ σεπτὰς εἰκόνας κατέκασαν”)¹⁸.

c) In the 15th century, the beheaded trunk of Dagon might have been figuratively understood as an image for the besieged Constantinople,

¹⁶ The earliest attestation of this explanation was provided by Jerome in his *Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum* (written ca 390): “Dagon, piscis tristitiae”, later paralleled by Rashi (1040–1105), David Kimchi (1160?–1235?) and others.

¹⁷ See Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister, *The Philistines: Their History and civilization*, London: Oxford University Press, 1913, p. 100.

¹⁸ *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca, ed. Jacques Paul Migne, t. 95, Parisiis: Excudebatur et venit apud J.-P. Migne, 1864, col. 372.

cut off from the former Byzantine territories. Indeed, the Byzantine Empire inherited from the pagan Roman Empire not merely the name, but also the predominantly negative Jewish feelings about it¹⁹, which became even worse in the Christian period, when the social position of the Jews became much more complicated²⁰. The dramatic decline of the formerly vast and powerful state, in the 15th century already reduced almost entirely to its capital city, and its final destruction may have been viewed by the Jewish community as a result of the Divine Providence²¹, analogous to the mystic destruction of Dagon in front of the ark of the Lord.

This parallel must have been apparent at least to the Romance-speaking people, like the Italian or Sephardi Jews, whose communities spread to the Eastern Mediterranean region, cf. Latin *caput* “head; capital (city)”. The analogy is not complete, since “the *head* of Dagon and both the *palms* of his hands lay cut off upon the threshold; only the *trunk* of Dagon was left to him”, in contrast to the Byzantine Empire, which until 1453 still kept its “head” (Constantinople) and both “palms” (the nearest region in Thrace and the Despotate of the Morea in the Peloponnese), but this reverse discrepancy could not prevent the analogy.

¹⁹ Nicholas Robert Michael de Lange, “Jewish attitudes to the Roman Empire”, in: *Imperialism in the Ancient world*, eds. Peter D. A. Garnsey, Charles Richard Whittaker, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1978, pp. 255–281.

²⁰ See Nicholas Robert Michael de Lange, “Jews and Christians in the Byzantine Empire: problems and prospects”, in: *Christianity and Judaism: Papers read at the 1991 Summer Meeting and the 1992 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Diana Wood, Oxford–Cambridge (Mass.): Blackwell Publishers, 1992 (*Studies in Church History*, vol. 29), pp. 27–30; Nicholas Robert Michael de Lange, “Hebrews, Greeks or Romans? Jewish culture and identity in Byzantium”, in: *Strangers to themselves: The Byzantine outsider: Papers from the Thirty-second Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (University of Sussex, Brighton, March 1998), eds. Dion C. Smythe, Aldershot etc.: Ashgate, 2000 (*Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies. Publications*, vol. 8), pp. 113–118.

²¹ Cf. “The fall of Constantinople appeared to Jews to herald the Redemption: the Targum for Lamentations 4:21 was held to prophesy the downfall of the ‘guilty city’; some predicted that redemption would occur in the same year, 1453”, see Andrew Sharf, “Constantinople”, in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, second edition, eds. Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum, vol. 5, Detroit etc.: Thomson Gale, Keter Publishing House, 2007, p. 183.

These three different aspects, however hypothetical they may be, allow a parallel between the biblical story of Dagon and the fate of the Byzantine Empire through ethnic modernization of the people originated from Caphthor (the Caphthorites and the Philistines → the Greeks), whose god in one way or another was associated with fish (Dagon and Jesus), and understanding of the decapitated Dagon as a biblical image for the Byzantine Empire prior to the fall of Constantinople. This analogy rests on the combination of ethnic (a), religious (b), and textual (c) grounds, based predominantly on certain interpretation of the actual realities of the 15th century through the Bible text and, *mutatis mutandis*, on the reinterpretation of the Bible in the light of new historical events. The process was enhanced by the traditional Jewish pan-temporal view of history in which past, present and future are not easily distinguishable.

It is quite possible that the definition of Hebrew *kaftor* presented in the Cyrillic manual of Hebrew (known in a manuscript copy of the third quarter of the 15th century) reflects Jewish attitudes to Byzantium's troubles prior to or shortly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.