

A Tensile Etymology for Aaron: 'ahārōn > 'ahālōn

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Past attempts to solve the question of Aaron's etymology have been unconvincing.¹ Scholars seeking solutions from Semitic roots have fared poorly, finding only a rare Syrian cognate ('hr') which means "libidinous/lascivious".² Others link Aaron's name to the sacred ark ('ārōn), claiming the definite article א through metathesis became the second root letter.³ Scholars have done slightly better with Egyptian etymologies, as this would fit other Levitical names from Egypt such as Moses, Phinehas, and Hophni.⁴ Among proposed Egyptian etymologies are „Great is the name“ ('3 m) or "Horus" (hwr).⁵ Thus it seems in the absence of an easy etymology, we are driven to the far fetched.

An explanation which better fits Aaron's occupation as maintainer of the Tabernacle is that his name is simply an Egyptianized form of Semitic 'hl with an adjectival suffix -ōn; hence, 'ahārōn would mean "tent-man."⁶ The use of 'hl in personal names is commonly attested.⁷ The Egyptian language, in the absence of an "l" sound, replaced foreign "l" with "r".

¹ Hence, J. Spencer writes, "The meaning of the name 'Aaron' is uncertain, although it is perhaps derived from Egyptian", in "Aaron", ABD I:1.

² W. Gesenius, *Thesaurus Philologicus Criticus Linguae Hebraeae et Chaldaeae Veteris Testamenti* (1829): p.33.

³ E Meyer, *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme* (1906): pp.93-94. Some argue that the title „sons of the ark“ (b'nē hā'ārōn) became sons of Aaron" (b'nē 'ahārōn) and eventually became personified in the character Aaron. See W.H. Bennett, *Exodus*, Century Bible (London, 1908): p. 63.

⁴ For the Egyptian derivation of many Hebrew Bible names, see M. Noth, *Die Israelitischen Personennamen*, pp. 63-64.

⁵ For the "name is great" etymology, see I. Hösl, *Zur orientalischen Namenskunde: Maria - Moses - Aaron. Eine philologische Studie* (Leiden, 1952): p. 85. For a review of other less likely Egyptian candidates, including Horus, see M. Görg, "Aaron - von einem Titel zum Namen?" *Biblische Notizen* 32 (1986): pp. 11-17, who proposes the name Aaron comes from an Egyptian title meaning „Oberer“.

⁶ Similarly, the -ōn suffix can be diminutive, J. Barth, *Nominalbildung in den Semitischen Sprachen*, (Leipzig, 1894): pp. 348-49. On adjectival use, see Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd English edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910). Hebrew comparisons include 'išōn (little man), š'pīpōn (adder), šahārōn (new-moon), and saww^rrōnīm (necklace).

⁷ In the Hebrew Bible, note Oholiab, Oholibamah, Oholah, Oholibah, and Ohel. A bulla from the City of David includes the personal name 'hl, in Y. Shiloh, "A Group of Hebrew Bullae from the City of David," *IEJ* 36 (1986): p. 29, n. 29. A seal from a burial cave on Mount Zion reads lḥmy'hl, in D. Davies and A. Kloner, "A Burial Cave of the Late Israelite Period of the Slopes of Mt. Zion," *Qadmoniot* 41 (1978): pp. 18-19 (Hebrew). Phoenician names include 'hmlk, gr'hl, and 'hbl' in F.L. Benz, *Personal Names in the Phoenician and Punic Inscriptions* (Rome: Biblical

Thus the name Israel is represented as *ysr'ir* on the Merneptah stele, and Ptolemy is rendered *ptormys* on the Rosetta stone. There are multiple recordings of 'hr for "tent" in Egyptian records beginning in the New Kingdom.⁸ Furthermore, among the many Egyptian names of Semitic derivation exists an 18th or 19th dynasty stable master named 'aharaya, which apparently means "Yahweh is a tent."⁹ The two forms -*ay(a)* and -*ôn* are also found in the two names Samson (*šimsôn*) and Shimshai (*šimsay*) in Judges 13 - 16 and Ezra 4 respectively. Aaron's nominal derivation from 'hl is furthered by an attestation of the Semitic name 'hln (tent-man) found on a Thamudic rock inscription.¹⁰ Strengths of this etymology are a name corresponding to Aaron's duties and an Egyptian derivation similar to his fellow Levites.

Institute Press, 1972): pp. 60, 262, and 'hl in J. Naveh, Phoenician Ostraca from Tel Dor," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots*, Fs. J.C. Greenfield (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995): pp. 461-62. Sabaeen names have been found reading 'hl' and 'hl 'yr in J. Halévy, *Inscriptions sabéennes* (1872): 46.2. CIH 434.1, 547.1. See also G. Ryckmans, *Les Noms propres sud-sémitiques, tome I: Répertoire analytique* (Bibliothèque du Muséon 2; Louvain, 1934): pp. 27-28. Finally Lihyanic 'hln is recorded in B. Moritz, "Edomitische Genealogien," ZAW 44 (1926): p. 87.

⁸ J.E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): p. 31.

⁹ T. Schneider, *Asiatische Personennamen in ägyptischen Quellen des Neuen Reiches Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 114 (Freiburg, 1992): pp. 105-06. For other examples of Egyptian names from Semitic origins, see R. Giveon, *The Impact of Egypt on Canaan Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 20 (Göttingen, 1978): pp. 15-21.

¹⁰ R.P. Jaussen, *Mission archéologique en Arabie II* (Paris, 1914): p. 583. The inscription was found near el-Heboush el-Sharky near Teima.