

Gary A Rendsburg (Cornell University)

תַּלְפִּיּוֹת (SONG 4:4)

ABSTRACT

The hapax legomenon תַּלְפִּיּוֹת in Song 4:4 is nowadays typically translated as "courses," based on a reputed root לפי/לפא "arrange in courses" in Aramaic and/or Arabic. Closer inspection reveals that this root does not bear this meaning in these languages, and that in any case such a meaning does not fit the context. A new etymology is proposed. The noun is a plural taqtîl formation from the root לפי, which in Modern South Arabian means "be able to climb easily." Thus תַּלְפִּיּוֹת means "heights," and the whole phrase is to be translated "your neck is like the tower of David, built to the heights." This rare Hebrew noun was used in Song 4:4 to create an alliteration with the surrounding words אֶלֶף "thousand" and תָּלַי "hung."

After more than a century and a half of modern lexicographical research in ancient Hebrew, the meanings of selected individual words continue to elude scholars. Among the more elusive has been the hapax legomenon תַּלְפִּיּוֹת in Song 4:4.¹

There is no need to review here the many attempts - ancient, medieval, and modern - to elucidate this word. The weighty commentary of M H Pope may be consulted profitably in this regard.² But notwithstanding the diverse opinions expressed by translators and commentators in times past, in recent years a consensus has begun to develop. The word typically is treated as a feminine plural noun of the taqtîl formation based on the root לפא or לפי, reputed to mean "arrange in courses" in Aramaic and/or Arabic. Thus the common translation offered nowadays is "courses."³ Furthermore, because the half-verse reads כְּמִגְדַּל דָּוִד צֹנֶאֱרֶךְ בְּנוֹי לְתַלְפִּיּוֹת "Your neck is like the tower

¹ The word is listed, though not treated, in H R Cohen (1978:125); and in F E Greenspahn (1984:186). I do not intend this remark as a criticism. The former work, as the title indicates, is devoted to light shed by Ugaritic and Akkadian on unique words in the Bible; and the latter work, as the subtitle indicates, is devoted mainly to verbs.

² M H Pope (1977:465-68). The only important works that I would add to Pope's survey are S Krauss (1930-31:251-56); and E Ben Yehuda (1912-48:16.7779-80).

³ First suggested by A M Honeyman (1949:50-52); then seconded by B S J Isserlin (1958:59-61); and accepted in standard commentaries (such as Pope 1958:465-68; and M V Fox 1985:130-31) and dictionaries (KB, 1030; HALAT, 1603). Some standard

of David, built in/for/by תַּלְפִּיּוֹת, the "courses" are assumed to refer to a layered necklace which bedecks the female lover's neck.

There are numerous difficulties with this interpretation. The most efficient way to present them and to discuss them is to cite fully the words of A M Honeyman, upon whom all later scholars rely for their understanding of תַּלְפִּיּוֹת as "courses." Honeyman (1949:51) wrote: "In form תַּלְפִּיּוֹת is a plural of a feminine *taqīlat* type from the root *lp* 'to arrange in courses'." In a footnote to this sentence he supported his claim with the following: "Cf. Aram. 33a, *af^{el}* 'anreihen' (Levy), e.g. Targ. Jer. Lev. vi 5 for וְעָרַךְ, Babli Yoma 33a, *af^{el}* 'schichten' (Dalman); [Arabic] *lafa^a* 'peel, skin' and VIII (Steingass)" (Honeyman 1949:51 n.8)."

The first difficulty concerns the identification of the root: is it the *lamed-^aaleph* (III') root לָפַא or the *lamed-yod* (IIIy) root לָפִי? As Honeyman noted, the root לָפַא exists in Arabic; it means not only "peel, skin, strip" (so Honeyman), but also "drive away, reject, diminish," and "find, meet, encounter, reach," in its various conjugations.⁴ None of these definitions fits the context of תַּלְפִּיּוֹת in Song 4:4. Furthermore, the editors of the most recent Hebrew dictionary have misconstrued matters in stating that Arabic *lafa^a* means "in Reihen ordnen" (HALAT, 1603). As far as I am able to determine, this is simply incorrect.

Moreover, were it correct, one still would have to overcome the difficulty of deriving תַּלְפִּיּוֹת from a *lamed-^aaleph* root (III') לָפַא. The root which normally would be reconstructed from the form תַּלְפִּיּוֹת is a *lamed-yod* root (IIIy) לָפִי. Note that most instances of the *taqīl* formation in Hebrew derive from *lamed-yod* roots: תְּבִנִית "pattern, model" (from בָּנִי), תְּכֵלִית "completeness" (from כָּלִי), תַּעֲנִית "fasting" (from עָנִי), תַּרְבִּית "interest" (from רָבִי), תַּרְמִית "deceitfulness" (from רָמִי), etc. (see already Rashi in his comment on תַּלְפִּיּוֹת).⁵ And while the interchange between *lamed-^aaleph* and *lamed-yod* roots is common within both Arabic and Hebrew as individual languages, especially in their colloquial varieties (Rendsburg 1990:85-94), I can think of no instance where a Hebrew IIIy verb is cognate to an Arabic III' verb.

translations, however, still retain an older interpretation; cf. NAB "battlements" and NJV "to hold weapons."

⁴ E W Lane (1863-93: 7.2665); F J Steingass (1884:922-23); and M Ullmann (1970-91:2/2.959-60, 1028-40).

⁵ The few *taqīl* forms from strong roots, e.g., תַּלְמִיד "scholar" (1 Chr 25:8), and תַּכְרִיד "robe" (Esth 8:15), apparently are to be explained as Aramaisms. Thus P Joüon and T Muraoka [1991: 1.261 (§88Lt)]. More examples are to be found in Mishnaic Hebrew; see M H Segal (1927:118).

Honeyman also referred to Aramaic לפא or לפי, but here too his presentation is riddled with problems.⁶ He was correct in listing both roots because the word is attested only in Middle Aramaic, in which III' and IIIy roots have merged, and thus it is impossible to determine whether the root is indeed לפי or rather לפא. If the root is לפא, then the discussion in the preceding paragraph is germane here as well. If the root is לפי this objection disappears. However, still one must arrive at a suitable definition for Aramaic לפי.

Although Honeyman's footnote implies that the root is attested twice in Jewish Aramaic, in *Tg. Ps.-J. Lev 6:5* and in *b. Yoma 33a*, in truth it occurs only in the former passage. Accordingly, it is a *hapax legomenon* in the vast corpus of Jewish Middle Aramaic. *Tg. Ps.-J. Lev 6:5* reads (in part) as follows: וילפי עלה כהנא אעין,⁷ corresponding in the Hebrew text to ובער עליה העלה, literally "the priest shall burn wood upon it," more idiomatically "the priest shall feed wood to it"⁸ (since the fire already was burning and was not to be extinguished). Note that Aramaic לפי is used to render Hebrew בער "burn, feed wood," not Hebrew ערך "arrange," as stated by Honeyman. Later in the verse the Hebrew text reads ויערך עליה העלה, but this is rendered in *Tg. Ps.-J.* as ויסדר עלה עלתא (Clarke 1984:124), with סדר "arrange" corresponding perfectly to ערך "arrange."

Honeyman incorrectly cited *b. Yoma* as another attestation of the root לפי or לפא, because he misunderstood the comment of J Levy in his dictionary of the Targumim. Levy translated this lexeme as "anreihen" based on the extensive discussion of Lev 6:5 in *b. Yoma 33a* ("nach Joma 33a"),⁹ in which the arrangement of wood is discussed, with recourse only to ובער עליה and not to ויערך עליה העלה. Furthermore, Levy assumed (perhaps correctly, but not necessarily so) that לפי is a by-form of the better attested root לפף "connect, arrange" (an approach also taken by S Krauss (1930-31:252)). As to Honeyman's citation of G H Dalman (1938:219), one can note only that the latter did indeed use "schichten" in his entry, a notion probably based on Levy. Honeyman did not cite M Jastrow, but for the sake of

⁶ I am grateful to Stephen A Kaufman for his assistance on the Aramaic end of this paper.

⁷ E H Clarke (1984:124; see also p. 331).

⁸ Translation of *NJV*; see also J Milgrom (1991:379, 387).

⁹ J Levy (1867:1.413). See also J Levy (1879:2.517).

completeness I note here that he too translated לָפַי or לָפָא as "join, arrange."¹⁰

After this dissection of Honeyman's treatment, with a concomitant presentation of the relevant Arabic and Aramaic data, how are we left? The root of תִּלְפִּיּוֹת cannot be לָפַא. The Arabic verbs derived from this root do not fit the context of Song 4:4, and in any case the morphology of תִּלְפִּיּוֹת points to its derivation from a root לָפַי. The Aramaic material may be helpful, but a) still we cannot be sure if the root is לָפַא or לָפַי (and if it is the former the morphological difficulty remains); b) even if the root is לָפַי, we cannot be sure that it means "arrange," since its only attestation in *Tg. Ps.-J.* renders Hebrew בָּעַר "burn, feed wood," and c) even if the meaning "arrange" be granted (based on Levy's insights derived from *b. Yoma* 33a), one wonders if this definition can be extended to "arrange in courses, layer" (Dalman's "schichten" notwithstanding).

But even if we grant the assumptions a) that the root of the exceedingly rare Middle Aramaic lexeme is indeed לָפַי, b) that this root means "arrange," and c) that the step from "arrange (wood)" to "arrange (stone) in courses" is possible, there are still further difficulties. For while it is true that towers are built by the placement of one course of stones upon another, courses of stones are distinctive of other types of building as well, e.g., city walls, large public buildings such as palaces and temples, etc. In other words, courses of stones are not unique to towers and towers do not have courses of stones as their most distinctive feature. On the contrary, the most distinctive characteristic of a tower is its height. Accordingly, one would expect that our word תִּלְפִּיּוֹת refers not to the manner of construction but to the height of the tower. This is especially the case if we assume, as most readers do, that a tall neck is envisioned by our poet when comparing the female lover's neck to the tower of David (see Song 7:5 for another comparison of the neck to a tower).

A further problem concerns the extension of the word תִּלְפִּיּוֹת, even if it means "courses," to refer to a layered necklace. The imagery of jewelry clearly is present in the second half of the verse, אֶלֶף הַמִּגֵּן תִּלְוִי עָלָיו כָּל שְׁלֹשֵׁי הַגְּבוּרִים "a thousand shields hanging upon it, all the weapons of the heroes," in which the metal objects "shields" and "weapons" represent jewelry made of metal (and other materials). But to introduce this imagery into the first half of the verse is inappropriate. There the imagery intended is solely that of the high neck of the female lover (again, compare Song 7:5).

In light of the manifold difficulties discussed above, it is advisable to discard the view that תִּלְפִּיּוֹת means "courses" and to approach the problem afresh. Based on the above comments, the best solution to an explication of תִּלְפִּיּוֹת is a root לָפַי with a meaning related to height.¹¹ Such a root appears in

¹⁰ M Jastrow (1903:2.715; see also p. 700 under לָפַי).

¹¹ Note that Ibn Ezra (see his comment to Song 4:4) understood that תִּלְפִּיּוֹת must relate in some way to a "great height," though along with others in the medieval period he derived the word from the root אִלַּף "teach." The phrase "great height" does not occur in the printed

the Modern South Arabian languages, where the verb *lfy* means "be able to climb easily (as, for example, a ladder or a mountain)" in Jibbali and Mehri.¹² On the basis of this cognate, one should posit in ancient Hebrew the root תַּלְפִּי meaning "climb, ascend" or the like, and from it a feminine singular noun *תַּלְפִּיּוֹת meaning "height, steps, staircase, ladder, etc." In its single attestation in the Bible,¹³ the noun תַּלְפִּיּוֹת would mean "heights," let us say. This, after all, is the distinctive feature of a tower, and this meaning fits the context well. Song 4:4a then would be translated "Your neck is like the tower of David, built to the heights."¹⁴

If my interpretation is correct, one legitimately may ask why did the poet elect to use the rare word תַּלְפִּיּוֹת for "heights" when presumably other words were available, for example, lexemes derived from the roots גָּבַה, רוּם, סָלַל, or other possibilities. The answer lies in the alliteration created between תַּלְפִּיּוֹת and the words אֶלֶף "thousand" and תָּלַי "hung," both of which follow in quick succession (perhaps also with שְׁלֵטִי "the weapons of" later in the verse¹⁵).

Finally, if it be objected that a cognate from Modern South Arabian should not be utilized for the elucidation of a Biblical Hebrew word, the following point is important to make. The very close affinity of all the Semitic languages, "which are not less similar to each other than languages belonging to one branch of Indo-European" (Blau 1978:22), makes it possible to locate cognates in two relatively distant members of the language family. Examples of cognates shared only by modern South Semitic languages and by ancient Northwest Semitic languages are the following:¹⁶ Ugaritic *npr* "bird" and Tigrinya *nfr* "fly" (Ullendorff 1951:273-74); Ugaritic *gr* "groan" and Soqotri *ry* "sulk" (Leslau 1968:361); and Hebrew רָחַם "rain" and Mehri/Harsusi/Jibbali *rh̄m* "rain" (Rendsburg 1987:623-28). The above analysis of תַּלְפִּיּוֹת adds another example to this growing list of cognates shared by modern South Semitic and ancient Northwest Semitic.

editions of Ibn Ezra's commentary in the standard versions of *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, but it must occur in the manuscripts, at least according to the information contained in T Muraoka and Z Shavitsky (1989:109-10), citing H J Mathews (1874) (unfortunately unavailable to me).

12 T M Johnstone (1981:160) and (1987:251-52).

13 The form תַּלְפִּי in Job 35:11 derives from the root אָלַף "teach" with the *aleph* elided, as clearly evidenced by its parallel position with חָכַם "be wise." Note that the Targum understood it this way (the reading is מֵאֲלָף). See also Ibn Ezra's comment to Song 4:4 (cf. above note 11) and many moderns, e.g., R Gordis (1978:402).

14 I recognize that the preposition לְ remains a bit problematic, but no more so than for the translation "courses" or for other attempts to deal with the word תַּלְפִּיּוֹת.

15 On the possibility of wordplay involving words with *tef* and words with *taw*, see W H Propp (1990:404-8).

16 These are but sampling. For others see G A Rendsburg (1987:623-28), and the bibliography cited there.

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