

*The “Mercy Seat” and the Ark of the Testimony:
An Age-Old Misnomer?*

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ABSTRACT

*This short paper investigates the biblical Hebrew word *kappōret* in relation to languages of the ancient Near East. Taking *kappōret* to mean in its most basic sense “cover” or “lid,” we develop the possibility that a relationship may exist with the Egyptian word *kꜣp*, variously denoting a “cover,” “roof,” “shelter,” or “canopy.” We posit that *kappōret* may in fact be a loanword from Egyptian, with any loaning having a terminus ante quem of between the end of Seti I’s reign and the close of the 20th Dynasty (circa 1279–1077 BCE) based on textual attestations.*

Keywords: Ancient Near Eastern Languages, Ark of the Testimony, Biblical Hebrew, Egyptian Language, Etymology, Hebrew Bible, *Kappōret*, Mercy Seat

INTRODUCTION

The Ark of the Testimony, also referred to as the Ark of the Covenant, is perhaps *the* central object associated with the ancient Israelites of the Hebrew Bible. Simply put, the Ark is described as a container, housing the two stone tablets that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 25:16 and Deuteronomy 10:2). A wooden chest plated in gold, its construction is detailed extensively in the Book of Exodus. It accompanied the Israelites on their journeys and served as the primary focal point for communication with God. So important was the Ark that it is referenced in the texts of all the major Abrahamic religions, including Christianity (Hebrews 9:4 and Revelation 11:19) and Islam (Quran 2:248), attesting to the deep impact the object had across differing traditions. Associated with the Ark, however, are various obscure words, distorted by centuries of translation and retranslation.

Amongst these words is *kappōret*, or the so-called “Mercy Seat,” notable because its common translation makes little sense in relation to the word’s etymology. In biblical Hebrew, *kappōret* means “cover,” nothing more or less.¹ It is a technical word used only in

¹ We note that this simple translation will not be to everyone’s taste, and there are those who claim the word is “untranslatable.” Yet, the simple meaning cannot be overlooked, as functionally the *kappōret* does act as a

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its role as a cover or lid for the Ark, and the directions for its construction and use are found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.² Subsequently, it is found only once in 1 Chronicles 28:11 in David's pep talk with Solomon, who would soon embark on the construction of the Temple.³ It has been translated as mercy seat because of its perceived affinity to the idea of atonement and forgiveness⁴ as well as its possible connection to the word *kāpar*, translated by some as "to cover," which has many meanings associated with pacification, atonement, and mercy.⁵ This relationship, though postulated by many, should be approached with caution as there is a segment of scholars who claim that *kappōret* being derived from *kāpar* is "dubious."⁶ Therefore, let us examine first the possibility of such a derivation and then a potential alternative.

LANGUAGE LINKS

Can other languages lend a clue about the nature of the *kappōret* and whether it is linked to the concept of a covering? The word *kappōret* does not seem to have direct cognates in other Near Eastern languages. However, since the 19th century, scholars have proposed that its root, *kāpar*, has equivalents across the languages of the ancient Near East.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Akkadian *kupru*, pitch, is used to caulk the vessel of Utnapishtim, thus covering it.⁷ In Old Babylonian—a historical variety of Akkadian—the word *kapāru* (definition A) can mean "to wipe off, to smear on (a paint or liquid)," and *kuppuru*, the third meaning of *kapāru* A, is "to wipe off, to clean objects, to rub, to purify,"

lid. This covering function is bolstered by "targum fragments from Qumran (4QrgLev)," which "renders it *ksy*, 'cover.'" See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Anchor Bible, 1991) 1014.

² Whilst there is general agreement amongst scholars as to the covering nature of the *kappōret*, its actual function is a matter of debate, ranging from the simple (a lid or cover) to the more specific in regards to being the place "where personal contact is maintained between God and his people," as per Gerhard von Rad, "The Tent and the Ark (1931)," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 104.

³ In total, *kappōret* appears 27 times in the Hebrew Bible. For reference, those appearances are Exodus 25:17, 25:18, 25:19, 25:20 (twice), 25:21, 25:22, 26:34, 30:6, 31:7, 35:12, 37:6, 37:7, 37:8, 37:9 (twice), 39:35, and 40:20; Leviticus 16:2 (twice), 16:13, 16:14 (twice), and 16:15 (twice); Numbers 7:89; and 1 Chronicles 28:11. Most of these references are from Exodus and Leviticus, with percentages of occurrences as follows: Exodus - 66.67%; Leviticus - 25.93%; Numbers - 3.70%; 1 Chronicles - 3.70%.

⁴ This is particularly notable in the Septuagint translation of *kappōret*. In Exodus 25:17, it uses two words—*epithema* and *hilastērion*—roughly meaning "propitiatory lid." (Subsequently, the Septuagint only uses *hilastērion* when referencing propitiation.) This combination of concepts—that is, the physical and the cultic—may reflect the discussions and debates ongoing at the time. See Klaus Koch, "Some Considerations on the Translation of *Kappōret* in the Septuagint," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 65–75.

⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of these different meanings, see B. Lang, "כַּפֵּר," *TDOT* 7:288–303.

⁶ F. Maass, "כַּפֵּר," *TLOT* 2:807.

⁷ Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 265.

describing purification of the king, temple, house, and so forth.⁸ *Kupurtu* in Old Babylonian is an “ointment,” another form of covering.⁹ All of these definitions have the sense of a physical substance used as covering, each being made effective either through the application of that substance or its removal.

Ugaritic offers only a hint: *kpr* and *kpri*, both meaning “henna.” The plant from which it is derived, *Lawsonia inermis*, was known throughout the ancient Near East and was used for its fragrance and dye, which in effect is a covering for the skin as an adornment. Henna is one of the meanings of the Hebrew *kōper*, another supposed derivative of *kāpar*, albeit used only in the Song of Songs (1:14 and 4:13). There does not appear to be a similar word with the specific meaning of a covering or covering function in Ugaritic, but scholars do suggest a connection between Ugaritic *kpr* and the before mentioned Akkadian *kupru*, translated as “dry asphalt” but more likely meaning pitch or bitumen.¹⁰ Again, here is the idea of a covering substance.

No such words or connections arise from inspection of other ancient Near Eastern languages, such as Hittite and Sumerian. In Arabic, however, *kafara* does mean “to cover,” suggesting a shared origin with the Hebrew word *kāpar*, although the exact relationship is a matter of dispute.¹¹ These words have a similar meaning, all related to covering, whether through a structure, incense smoke, ointment, or literally taking cover, but it is the Egyptian sense of roof or lid that is most intriguing in connection to the Ark.

THE EGYPTIAN CONNECTION

The Egyptian word *kꜥp*, depending on the determinative and context, can have a wide variety of meanings, including “censer,”¹² “to fumigate,”¹³ “incense,”¹⁴ “canopy,”¹⁵ “to cover,”¹⁶ “to hide,”¹⁷ “to close,”¹⁸ and “a dressing material.”¹⁹ Alan Gardiner agrees that *kꜥp*

⁸ CAD 8:178–9.

⁹ Specifically, in Elamite and Old Babylonian texts. See CAD 8:556.

¹⁰ DULAT, s.v. “kpr II”, 452–3. Note also the following *kpt*, the meaning of which is highly disputed (453). Translations include “floor,” “sky,” “gangplank,” and “turban.” Whilst both “sky” and “turban” would indicate a covering (and could be cognate with Egyptian as per footnote 33 below), the sheer variety of meanings, some of which are entirely unrelated or opposite, makes establishing a plausible relationship with Hebrew *kapporet* difficult. Moreover, the equivalence between Ugaritic *ꜥ* and Hebrew *t* is uncertain.

¹¹ Lang, “כַּפֵּר”, TDOT 289.

¹² Wb 5, 103.8

¹³ Wb 5, 103.9–15

¹⁴ Wb 5, 104.3

¹⁵ Wb 5, 104.4–5

¹⁶ Wb 5, 104.8–12

¹⁷ Wb 5, 104.14–17

¹⁸ Wb 5, 104.12

¹⁹ Wb 5, 118.13–14

means “fumigate”²⁰ as well as a “cover (in building),”²¹ although he considers the nature of the “censer” determinative “doubtless misunderstood” after the Old Kingdom.²² David Falk, one of the scholars who suggests a relationship between Egyptian *kꜣp* and Hebrew *kappōret*, recently theorized that *kꜣp*, translated “lid,” as in the lid of a coffin, may be related in some way to *kappōret*. Reinforcing this is the fact that the biblical Hebrew word for Ark, *’ārōn*, can also mean “coffin,” and in the context of Genesis 50:26—the death and embalming of Joseph—an Egyptian coffin.²³ Other scholars also suggest an Egyptian etymology for *kappōret*, notably Manfred Görg and Y. M. Grintz. Görg hypothesizes that it may derive from the Egyptian phrase *kp (n) rdwy*, “sole of the foot,” thus indicating the Ark as some kind of divine footstool for God.²⁴ Grintz, like Falk, favors a derivation stemming from *kꜣp* – in his translation “covered” or “roof.”²⁵ He explains the unusual construction of the word via metathesis and gives several examples where this is the case across loanwords from Egyptian.²⁶ In fact, such metathesis is fairly common with loanwords.²⁷ This idea of a connection with *kꜣp* seems most fruitful for investigation, for the *kappōret* can accurately be described as a roof or cover.

One of the criticisms of equating *kꜣp* with *kappōret* is the lack of representation of the *resh*, which is present in the Hebrew but not in the Egyptian.²⁸ However, taking the idea of metathesis into account and the fact that Egyptian *ꜣ* may have been pronounced as a voiced uvular trill [ʀ], we can potentially see a scenario where *kꜣp.t* metathesised upon being loaned, with the *ꜣ* and the *p* switching positions. Thus, as a loan it may have had a sound value much more like *kappōret*.²⁹

²⁰ Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar: Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs*, 11th ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1982), 501.

²¹ Gardiner, 597.

²² Gardiner, 501.

²³ David Falk, *The Ark of the Covenant in Its Egyptian Context: An Illustrated Journey* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2021), 73. Falk provides a separate explanation as to why the *resh* as *r* might be missing in the Egyptian, specifically due to the phenomenon of the elimination of final weak consonants. The same could also be said of the feminine ending *t*, which is lost in written Late Egyptian, starting at the end of the New Kingdom. For a detailed analysis, see Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38ff.

²⁴ Manfred Görg, “Die Lade Als Thronsockel,” *Biblische Notizen* 1 (1976): 29–30. This assertion has been convincing to other scholars, including Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1982), 88.

²⁵ Y. M. Grintz, “Archaic Terms in the Priestly Code,” *Léšonénu: A Journal for the Study of the Hebrew Language and Cognate Subjects* 39, no. 5 (1975): 163–81.

²⁶ Grintz, 166.

²⁷ See, for example, entries on pages 120, 200, and 335 of Benjamin J. Noonan, *Non-Semitic Loanwords in the Hebrew Bible: A Lexicon of Language Contact (Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic, 14)* (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2019).

²⁸ The *tav* can likely be accounted for as the feminine final *t*, for example in *kꜣp.t*.

²⁹ Noonan, *Non-Semitic Loanwords in the Hebrew Bible: A Lexicon of Language Contact (Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic, 14)*, 278.

Outside of language, cultural similarities are also well worth noting, like the structural resemblance between the Ark and Egyptian barque shrines as perceived by Scott B. Noegel.³⁰ Such observations, coupled with the uncertainty over the word's actual origins, show the benefit of investigating a potential Egyptian connection, perhaps even the possibility of *kappōret* being a loanword, regardless of the direction of the loan.

Whilst there is a wide semantic range of words based on the root *kꜣp* with different determinatives, contexts, and relationships, what we can learn from its meaning as lid is likely most important, because this is the literal function of the *kappōret*. As *kꜣp.w*, meaning “roof,” “cover,” “lid,” the word is found attested only from the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1077 BCE).³¹ A. M. Blackman confidently states that the root verb *kꜣp*, “to cover,” is attested from at least the Edwin Smith Papyrus, which can be dated to the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1650–1550 BCE),³² although it is speculated that it may be based on a document originally composed in the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BCE).³³ It is possible to take the idea of covering further back in time, with *kꜣp* meaning “shelter” or “canopy,” dating to the 12th Dynasty (c. 1991–1802 BCE).³⁴ Less certain, but considerably older, is a text from the Mastaba of Khnumenti, dating from the 5th/6th Dynasty (c. 25th century BCE–c. 2181 BCE), accompanying a sailing scene.³⁵ Although damaged, the text may read, “[*kꜣp*] *m tꜣ(y)t*,” perhaps to be translated as follows: “Use the canopy as a sail!” “Shelter in the rigging!” Or, “Adjust the rigging!” Either of the former two translations would suggest a physical shelter or canopy. This material nature as canopy or textile is borne out in two instances: In the Ebers Papyrus (dating to c. 1550 BCE), *kꜣp.w* is potentially translated as “cloth,” in this case of fine linen used in a remedy.³⁶ In the previously mentioned Edwin Smith Papyrus, *kꜣp.t* seems to be a piece of linen placed over the mouth of a jar as a sieve or filter for the preparation of a treatment.³⁷ Both cases describe the fabric as a physical cover over something.

Is there anything about the temporal distribution of these words that can give a clue to when any loaning may have happened? It is especially challenging to aggregate all

³⁰ Scott B. Noegel, “The Egyptian Origin of the Ark of the Covenant,” in *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*, ed. Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H.C. Propp (Cham: Springer, 2015), 223–42.

³¹ See specifically Wb 5, 104.6. Also of note are ostraca from the reigns of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III in William C Hayes, “A Selection of Tuthmoside Ostraca from Dēr El-Bahri,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 46 (1960): 29–52.

³² A.M. Blackman, “Some Notes on the Story of Sinuhe and Other Egyptian Texts,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 22, no. 1 (1936): 38.

³³ It is worth noting that there may be a yet unexplored connection between *kꜣp* (to cover) and *gb.t/gp.t/kꜣp.t*, meaning sky, vault of heaven.

³⁴ “I slept under the *cover* of a tree, hugging the shade” (emphasis added). See pPetersburg 1115 (The Shipwrecked Sailor), line 43–44 in A.M. Blackman, *Middle-Egyptian Stories: 1. The Story of Sinuhe, 2. The Shipwrecked Sailor* (Brussels: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1972), 42.

³⁵ Edward Brovarski, *The Senedjemib Complex, Part 1: The Mastabas of Senedjemib Inti (G 2370), Khnumenti (G 2374), and Senedjemib Mehi (G 2378)* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2000), 116–17, fn. 18.

³⁶ pEbers 30,5 (Eb 130) in Walter Wreszinski, *Der Papyrus Ebers: Umschrift, Übersetzung Und Kommentar (Die Medizin Der Alten Ägypter Band 3)* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1913), 35.

³⁷ pEdwin Smith 22.6, as per line count in James Henry Breasted, *The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus, Volume 1: Hieroglyphic Transliteration, Translation, and Commentary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 495.

attestations of individual word-meanings, given the vast number of texts available, although the application of emerging artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques may prove useful in this regard in the future. However, some attempts present intriguing results.

First, let us examine the Egyptian noun *kꜣp*, meaning “shelter” or “canopy,” with additional known meanings of “refuge” and “hiding place.” The latest occurrence we could find is the recto of Papyrus Turin Cat. 1966, Love Song Nos. 28–30,³⁸ likely dated to the 20th Dynasty (c. 1189–1077 BCE). The line in question is part of Song 28, which perhaps translates as “Let him spend the whole day having fun in his hiding place/shelter/canopy,” *kꜣp.w* here translated as “hiding place,” “shelter,” or “canopy.” Importantly, this designates a physical covering. It seems likely that this meaning of a physical covering is directly related to *kꜣp.w* in the meaning of “roof,” given the similarity of a roof to a canopy. However, since the last attestations with the meaning of “roof” are earlier, let us consider this later occurrence with a near identical meaning.³⁹

With *kꜣp* in its verbal meaning of “to cover” or “to roof,” the latest occurrence we could find is upon a stele of Seti I (c. 1290–1279 BCE) in Karnak dedicated to Amun.⁴⁰ The inscription reads: “King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands, Menmaatre, ruler of Heliopolis, Son of Ra, Seti Merneptah, Divine Falcon who dwells in heaven after covering the Two Lands with his wings” (emphasis added). Here, *kꜣp* is the action of covering with wings, a protective image that, in the context of the Ark, conjures up visions of the two *cherubim* sitting atop the lid. Such winged imagery (sometimes depicting a winged disk) was common throughout the ancient Near East, and there is nothing to suggest that this inscription has a direct relationship to the *cherubim*. Even so, it is striking to see such depictions reflected across cultures.

It is the case that *kꜣp*, in its meaning “to hide,” is in use well into the reign of Roman Emperor Augustus, as is seen in his inscriptions on the Opet Temple in Karnak.⁴¹ Yet, the idea of hiding is dissimilar to the idea of a physical covering. Later attestations are known in Demotic as *qp(e)*, to hide, to be hidden; *gp*, to roof, to cover; and *qpe(t)*, vault, arch.⁴² Why, then, can we likely discount them as potential sources for a loan? Simply put, towards the end of the New Kingdom, significant linguistic changes had taken place that are detectable due to cuneiform transcriptions of Egyptian.⁴³ This included the loss of the final *t* at the end of words, probably because it ceased to be pronounced.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is unlikely, if an Egyptian word was loaned at this late stage, that we would see such a final *t* preserved, as we observe in *kappōret*.

³⁸ J sus Lopez, “Le Verger d’amour,” *Revue d’ gyptologie* 43 (1992): 133–43.

³⁹ See Footnote 31 above.

⁴⁰ Benedict G Davies, *Egyptian Historical Inscriptions of the Nineteenth Dynasty* (Jonsered: Paul  str ms f rlag, 1997), 257.

⁴¹ Alexa Rickert, *Gottheit Und Gabe: Eine  konomische Prozession Im Soubassement Des Opettempels Von Karnak Und Ihre Parallele In K m Ombo (Studien Zur Sp t gyptischen Religion 4)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), 207–15.

⁴² CDD Q, 26–28

⁴³ Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction*, 38.

⁴⁴ Jaroslav  ern y, Sarah Israelit Groll, and Christopher Eyre, *A Late Egyptian Grammar*, 4th ed. (Rome: EPIB, 1993), 6.

SUGGESTIONS AND SPECULATIONS

None of our investigations across any of the neighboring languages finds that the word *kappōret* as used in the Hebrew Bible can mean “Mercy Seat.” It is a misnomer that has persisted across centuries of mistranslations. As noted, it likely means a cover or a lid. Similar words in other ancient Near Eastern languages, including Akkadian and Ugaritic, both Semitic languages, show strong linguistic affinities around the idea of covering with a substance.

Ultimately, we find Egyptian to be the most compelling candidate for identifying *kappōret* with the physical form of a covering or lid, as this is the exact meaning of several Egyptian words based on the root *kꜣp*. The Egyptian meaning is much closer to the Hebrew than the meanings established in other Semitic languages, which strengthens the idea of it being a loanword rather than a pure cognate. We do not dismiss the fact that a more general term meaning “to cover” may be the ultimate source of all these words. Yet, it is important to point out that scholarship has long identified Egyptian (and other foreign) loanwords in the Hebrew Bible. Whether this Egyptian word was loaned into biblical Hebrew (or its antecedent) or vice versa is unknown.

Now, researchers are breathing new life into the field, specifically through analysis of the distribution of foreign loanwords throughout the biblical text.⁴⁵ When looking at Egyptian, they note that there is a particularly distinct distribution of words with Egyptian origins in both the account of Joseph in Egypt and in the Book of Exodus.⁴⁶ Whatever the exact circumstance of these texts’ composition, the terminology used is in keeping with the setting. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that *kappōret*, with most of its attestations from the Book of Exodus, may be an Egyptian loanword. When coupled with the physical similarity between the Ark upon which the *kappōret* lay and Egyptian ritual barques and barque shrines, the possibility becomes more pronounced.⁴⁷

For the sake of speculation, let us accept that the deductions above are correct. If this is so, can we determine over what period such a loan from Egyptian may have occurred?

Because the latest use of *kꜣp* meaning “cover” or “roof” is in the reign of Seti I, we can speculate that any loan of the word from Egyptian with this exact meaning could not have occurred later than his theorized last regnal year (1279 BCE). In terms of the meaning as a physical shelter or canopy, we cannot find references later than the 20th Dynasty (c. 1189–1077 BCE). Thus, we can establish a *terminus ante quem* between circa 1279–1077 BCE, during which time any loan from Egyptian would preserve the meaning of a covering.

Considering the dropping of the final *t* in Late Egyptian (c. 1350–700 BCE), we likely can rule out a loan occurring during that period. The development of Late Egyptian was not a monolithic event, and evidence suggests that older and formal texts have more similarities with Middle Egyptian forms as opposed to later texts where these forms are

⁴⁵ Noonan, *Non-Semitic Loanwords in the Hebrew Bible: A Lexicon of Language Contact (Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic, 14)*.

⁴⁶ Benjamin J. Noonan, “Non-Semitic Loanwords in the Hebrew Bible: A Lexicon of Language Contact,” *Ancient Near East Today* 8, no. 6 (2020).

⁴⁷ Noegel, “The Egyptian Origin of the Ark of the Covenant.”

scarce.⁴⁸ Therefore, we would also expect any loan to occur before or during the earlier period of Late Egyptian, which would be in keeping with the dates here suggested.

Whilst it may be radical suggestion, given what we know of the text, we can cautiously posit that any loan of the Egyptian word *kꜣp* (or its variants) may have occurred no later than 1279–1077 BCE, allowing us to tentatively anchor the composition, whether oral or written, of sections of the biblical text containing the word to at the latest circa 1077 BCE. This is significantly earlier than the widely accepted dating of any of the books in which *kappōret* appears, hence our caution; but it is nevertheless a fascinating possibility, opening new avenues for research, particularly in attempts to date other known Egyptian loanwords in the Hebrew Bible.

⁴⁸ Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction*, 7.

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