

— / MEPHISTOPHELES — A BIBLICAL HEBREW NAME?

מפיסטופלס שם עברי תנ"כי?

Author(s): YEHUDA T. RADDAY and יהודה רדאי

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## MEPHISTOPHELES — A BIBLICAL HEBREW NAME?

BY

YEHUDA T. RADDAY

In a letter to Carl Zelter of November 30, 1829 Goethe admitted that he had no idea what the name Mephistopheles means nor where it came from. It is not surprising therefore that commentators of *Faust* very soon gave up their efforts to detect its etymology since they were of the opinion that in any case it had nothing to contribute to understanding Goethe's work. The recent monumental study of Faust by A. Schöne (1994) does not pay much attention to the question either. The purpose of this enquiry is to show that he who first used the name did not do so by chance.

The name occurs for the first time in Germany in the anonymous horror story *Das Volksbuch des Doctor Faustus* (1587), shortly thereafter in the play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Marlowe (1564-1593) and subsequently in numerous works of literature (e.g. by Paul Valéry, Thomas Mann and Lessing). It has been set to music by Spohr, Berlioz, Gounod, Busoni and many others, presented as a ballet and two films, and has been painted and sculptured time and again. Of course none of these were concerned about the origin of the word.

A useful source in this respect is Stäubli's *Handbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (1927-1942). Stäubli collected no fewer than nineteen medieval versions of the name from *Puppenspiels* and legends written between the 16th and 18th century, such as Mephastopholos, Memostophiles, Megastophiles and Methostophiles, which only proves that nobody understood the name. But, after all, its inventor must have had something in mind when he gave the representative of the devil this curious name: he must have wanted to convey something in this way to viewers and readers, and had to be sure that they recognized what he had in mind. It follows that the name was comprehensible to the German public before Goethe used it, i.e. till roughly 1700. The meaning probably sank into oblivion when the Age of Reason shook the fundamentals of

religious belief and consequently magic was not *en vogue* anymore. In any case, when he started writing his *Urfaust* in 1772, Goethe, though very erudite, was already ignorant of the provenance of the name.

The entry *Mephistopheles* by Jacoby in Stäubli's *Handbuch* gives an excellent survey of the efforts made by a number of scholars to solve the riddle. One thing was clear: the word was not German. Because of its ending *-opheles*, Greek suggested itself as first choice. After the capture of Constantinople (1453) by the Osmons, Greek-speaking Christians fled to Southern Europe and introduced there the study of antiquity and with it the knowledge of Greek, mainly of course among clerics and intellectuals. An author had therefore reason to believe that a Greek name was understood at least by a coterie of learned people, which encouraged scholars to search in Greek dictionaries.

Thus, in 1676, Dürr proposed *Megastophilos*, meaning, so he claimed, "great and superior to anybody", a translation forced and an etymology farfetched. A little later, Stunz preferred *Magistopheles* which, in his opinion, stands for *highly useful* and refers to the god Hermes. Kieseewetter (1893) suggested *Mephostophiles*, said to be composed of *me*, a negative prefix, + *phos* (=light)+ *philos* (=loving), and to mean *abhorring light*. In order to account for the middle syllable /to/, he believed /t/ to be a "half-learned" infix. A few more stumbling-blocks he circumvents by means of metathesis, i.e. by substituting *phos* for *photos* or the other way round — the confusion is too great for a summary. Jacoby calls all this artificial, a verdict to which one cannot but subscribe. So much for the German philologists.

The pertinent British and American literature is not too rich, but displays a striking interest in *Faust*. Two Oxford Germanists, Butler (1948) and Empson (1987), tackled the matter. The first states that the name must have been coined by the author of the *Volksbuch*, since J. Wier's *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum* (1578) does not yet mention it. Empson rejects Butler's explanation *Me* + *Fausto* + *philes* (= none of Faust's friends) as absurd and proposes instead *Me+to+phos+philes* (= light is not a friend [of him]). He thinks that the author of the *Volksbuch*, whose Greek was weak, found in a Greek dictionary the noun *phos* conventionally not preceded, but followed by the definite article *to*. This the author allegedly took it for an error and "corrected" it by transposition which made *to+phos* out of *phos+to*. In Marlowe's *Mephastophiles*, Empson surmises *phas* (=justice) to be an intentional substitute for *phos* and thus denouncing Faust's false friend of being shy of right and not of light. Empson and Butler may be ingenious, but the abundant use of *light* in their grammatical contortions leaves us rather in the dark. In short, hypothesis follows hypothesis, each resting on too little Greek grammar or requiring too much learning. It is all Greek to those who have no Greek or bad Greek to those who have some.

A search in relevant French publications did not bear any fruit. The name did not interest the Romanists.

When reading the works of the scholars quoted, one gets the impression that they themselves did not believe in their suggestions either. In any event, there remains the puzzle why an author should have troubled in 1587 to invent a name the meaning of which becomes clear only after reading an explicatory footnote written three centuries later by a classical scholar.

After probing Greek turned out to be unsatisfactory, scholars addressed their attention to Hebrew. It was the language of the Holy Writ, which attracted not a few in the period of the High Renaissance, it was older than Greek, its script stranger and written backwards, hence it promised to contain that secret wisdom and magic power which Faust aspired to. Learned men began studying Hebrew: among the pupils of the Jewish grammarian Elijah Levita Bachur were Christian humanists of renown such as Sebastian Münster and Cardinal Egidius da Viterbo. After Elija Levita had died in 1549, after Johannes Reuchlin had introduced the study of Hebrew in Southern Germany with his *De rudimentis hebraicis* (1506) and after Luther had translated the entire Bible into the German vernacular (1534) so that it now became accessible to the multitudes, an author had good reason to trust that his allusions to Hebrew and to Scripture would be understood and appreciated by his readers.

The first to attempt at detecting a Hebrew etymology for Mephistopheles was W. Weber's (1836). Somewhat familiar with kabbalistic magic he felt there were grounds for finding a clue. Even so, already his first steps led him astray. His starting point that the hapax *mappách* stands for a *slight breath* was an error since the context in Job 11:20 demands *sigh*. On the other hand, he correctly recalled the Greek noun *mephitis* as *obnoxious smell of the soil*. The two together and combined with *philos* (=friend), Weber believed to fit "without difficulty" someone who arose from Hell and exuded an unpleasant stench. Yet his hybrid construct is not convincing because it presupposes, in order to be understood, proficiency not in Greek or Hebrew, but in both.

After Weber, Jacoby turns to Schröer (n.d.) in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. He, too, has recourse to Hebrew, albeit again without much success. First, he found *mefiz* in Nahum 2:2 and translated in *ruining*, and then *tófel* (= nonsense, mendacious?) in Job 13:4, which, when glued together, might well, he believed, be an appellation of Mephistopheles. Very soon after, Simchowitz in *Kölnische Zeitung* of April 13, 1928, called Schröer rather offensively a stay-at-home bookworm and pointed out that the first component does not mean *ruining*, but *spreading*. As to the second, he preferred *tiflút* (= frivolity, foolishness), pronounced by Ashkenasi Jews *tiflus*. The author of the *Volksbuch* may have understood a word or two in Biblical Hebrew but hardly a relatively rare one in Mishnaic.

Finally, Jacoby himself: He was very near an answer, but missed the chance, as we shall see. First, he unearthed in the Bible a man of no consequence named Tab'eal (Is 7:6 and nowhere else!), presumably an Aramaean general. Rashi understands the name as "One who is not good in Gods eyes". Another whose name is similar, but pronounced Tav'el (Ezra 4:7), is a subaltern Persian official. He then approaches the matter from a different angle. Jacoby interprets the first syllable as *tov* (=good)+ *el* (=power?) or *al* (=no) and arrives in this manner at what he thinks is equivalent to German *Tunichtgut* (= *Good-for-nothing* or *Destroyer of divine Goodness*).

Jacoby, dissatisfied with himself, then recalls that 2 Sam. 15:12 tells of a man at King David's court called Achitophel. The find was fortunate, yet it was his bad luck to rely on Gesenius' Dictionary where the name is translated *Bruder der Torheit* (=brother of foolishness). Now a few verses later, in 2 Sam. 15:31, he found a short prayer which reads in Luther's translation "*Betöre doch den Rat des Achitophel, oh HErr*" (=Oh Lord, befool Achitophel's advice). On these foundations, he builds a shaky edifice of fanciful conjectures. Their upshot is that just as Achitophel tried to befool David — as we shall see presently — thus Mephistopheles tried to befool Faust. Jacoby correctly considered the German noun *Torheit* and the verb *betören* to be derived from the same noun *Tor* (=fool), but forgot that this is so in German only and not in the Hebrew original! Here the noun and the verb have absolutely nothing to do with each other. Being no Hebraist himself, what he should have done is suspect a pitfall and wonder how parents could give their newly-born child such a degrading name and mark by it two of their sons for a lifetime of ridicule. Besides, Achitophel was hardly that counsellor's original name but most probably "bowdlerized" out of contempt, the reason of which we shall learn soon. Unlike Gesenius, recent lexicographers such as König (1922), Brown-Driver-Briggs (1981) and Zorell (1982) do not discuss the name at all. With all due gratitude to Jacoby for the survey of his predecessors' work, one cannot help viewing with regret his own attempt as a failure, the more so because he was so near the truth.

For the sake of completeness, a few more scholars who might have something to say with regard to our enquiry deserve at least some mention. Louvier (1892) passes over the matter, Burdach (1912), though going back to Scripture, deals mainly with Moses, Durrani (1974) is interested in biblical figures, but not in their names, and Neher (1987) undertakes to compare Faust with his contemporary Rabbi Yehuda Loew ben Bezalel, an intriguing subject, however *irrelevant* to our purpose.

After a chaos of Greek language acrobatics and Hebrew flights of fancy, let us return to Achitophel. Jacoby was close to a solution, but took the wrong path.

However, before taking up where we erred, we must go back three thousand years and relate in short what 2 Samuel chs. 1-19, especially 16:20-17:23, has to say about him.

When King Saul and his three sons, among them Jonathan, fell in battle against the Philistines, David, his son-in-law, inherited the throne. Of Saul's descendants only the son of Jonathan, David's closest friend, remained alive, because, being lame, he did not join his father and his grandfather in battle. When David heard that he had survived, he confirmed him as the sole heir and lawful owner of his family's estates, appointed a certain Zivá as his steward and allocated to the cripple a yearly appanage.

In the first two decades of his reign David went from success to success, conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital. He also appointed the said Achitophel and his own equally elderly friend Chushái to serve as his counsellors. His fortune changed suddenly when one day he espied Batshéba, a beautiful young and married woman, from his roof and seduced her. He later arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed on the front and married his widow. Her first child died at childbirth. By the way, she was Achitophel's granddaughter.

After one decade David's son and heir Absalom rebelled against him. He had to flee Jerusalem on the spur of the moment, probably at night, and camped on the Mount of Olives where he was told that Achitophel had joined the rebel. Now, fearing that all was lost, he prayed to the Lord the short prayer mentioned above, namely that God may confound the traitor's counsel. At the same time, the new king summoned his council in Jerusalem for deliberation. Achitophel gave Absalom one piece of tactically invaluable and another of strategically smart advice. On the one hand, instead of granting the fugitive respite and before loyalists gathered around him, Absalom should dispatch the small force available at the moment under his, i.e. Achitophel's, command, to pursue and kill David. On the other hand, Absalom should assemble David's wives in a tent and enter it *coram publico* so as to cuckold his father and thus, should he survive, prevent his return forever. Here, the loyal Chushái intervened and, playing on Absalom's fear, lack of experience and wellknown vanity, suggested to him to mobilize a huge army, since David was unfortunately still quite popular, and then ride at its head against his father. When Absalom opted for Chushái's advice, Achitophel, wise enough to realize that the rebellion was doomed, hanged himself. As foreseen by him, the rebel fell and the throne reverted to David. Until today, the Hebrew idiom for highly useful, but morally contemptible advice is "an Achitophelian plan".

What Achitophel's motives were for his disloyalty is not hard to guess: he wished to take revenge on David, after about twenty-five years, for his

granddaughter's seduction. He had bidden his time waiting for the opportunity to pay the lecher back for it as well as for the murder of his opandson-in-law. He was also resolved to punish Batsheba for letting herself be seduced and for not having committed immediate suicide like Lucretia centuries later, staying with the king instead and even bearing him children — Solomon was one of them. When David was on the run and short of supplies, the lame youth's steward Zivá brought him and his men plentiful provisions. Asked about the whereabouts of his master, the man replied that the youth had taken to the rebel's side, whereupon the King transferred to him the ownership of the estate. However, when David returned to Jerusalem, the youngster presented himself to him, explained his staying away by his lameness, and complained that Zivá had slandered him as Absalom's accomplice. In doubt whom to believe David divided the estate between Zivá and his master. Incidentally, the latter's name was Mephibóshet.

At this point the reader will have guessed the gist of what is going to follow: the word Mephistopheles is composed of *Mephi*(boshet)+(Achi)*tophel*. Linguists call such a case a *portemanteau*. Bible scholars are probably right in their claim that quite like Achitophel's so Mephiboshet's name was not his original one, which will be discussed later.

The fact that the two name-halves fit nicely together is of course not reason enough to agree with the claim that the riddle has been solved. In the following a series of indications are enumerated to counter these doubts and support the claim. Not all of them are equally stringent, but none the less, they sum up to a hardly refutable cogency.

(1) Now, the name Mephistopheles is not anymore a hybrid monster put together by several rare or dubious words hidden in dictionaries nor a remote and unlikely artificial creation.

(2) The word is not composed of two different parts-of-speech, e.g. a noun, verb, particle, possibly with an in- or suffix, but in place of two words of the same category.

(3) This category is, again most fittingly, that of proper names as the two are intended to create one single proper name.

(4) These two proper names belong to one and the same language so that the new one is not anymore a concoction from different ones i.e. half-Greek and half-Hebrew.

(5) Moreover, these two proper names occur in one and the same and widely read literary collection and therefore were with high probability not foreign to the public in Germany.

(6) They occur in the Bible in one and the same book, in one and the same chapter and almost adjacent to each other.

(7) That book was, next to Genesis, probably the best known and beloved, because it is highly dramatic and its contents center around the one who was believed to be the forefather of Messiah. In the events the bearers of the names do not play insignificant roles: on the contrary, they fulfil parts so focal that they must have been well known and recognized at first sight.

(8) The two persons who carried these two names, respectively, were contemporaries, lived in the same place and even knew each other personally, thus welding their names together fulfills the Aristotelian requirement of the three dramatic units of time, place and plot.

(9) The advice given by the two treacherous counsellors to their respective friends whose downfall they planned was very similar. It seemed useful and attractive in the short run, but was destined to bring disaster upon their victims.

(10) The downfall of either is effected, or planned to be effected, through a woman or women.

(11) Batsheba as well as Faust's Gretchen gave birth to a child conceived "in sin". Both children die at birth.

(12) For the seduction of both, David and Faust are held responsible and consequently to be revenged by one of their near relatives: the grandfather in the one, the brother Valentin in the other case. Both culprits escape punishment.

(13) The term *distributio elementorum* goes back to Quintilian. It refers to permitting an author, in order to evoke in the reader's mind certain reactions, associations, etc. and thus remind him of a character in literature with whom he is familiar, to distribute traits of the latter's among various characters of his plot. Therefore, while it is true that Achitophel's granddaughter had no brother to kill her seducer, Absalom killed in ch.16 the man who had violated his sister (ch.13).

(14) The devil's bad odour is proverbial. It may be accidental — but few things in good literature are accidental — that Achitophel suggests to Absalom (16:21) to make his father "stinky". Most translators are too sensitive for rendering this outspoken Hebrew idiom as written, and prefer to paraphrase it.

(15) In the Middle Ages everybody knew that the devil had a club-foot — viz. Dürer's works and the witch's words in Goethe's *First Walpurgisnacht*. This physical defect is shifted here on Mephiboshet.

(16) Two undertones connect the latter with Hell. His grandfather Saul's name is in biblical consonantal spelling identical with the word *sheól* (= Underworld). The pronunciation of the two words is almost the same. Furthermore, Saul was the only one in the entire Bible to transgress in I Sam. ch. 28 the severe, four times repeated prohibition (3.M.19:31, 20:6, 20:27 and 5.M.18:11) on conjuring up and consulting with the dead. Just like the witch of En-Dor who resurrected Samuel when Saul asked her to, Mephistopheles resurrected Helen of Troy



from her grave to please the Doctor.

(17) Scripture says of Achitophel no less than that “In those days the counsel which Achitophel gave was as if one consulted God’s word” (16:23). His wisdom was such that it seemed not of this world. Neither was clever Mephistopheles of this world.

(18) The name *Faust* is derived from Latin *faustus* (=blessed with luck), and David, cognate to or even derived from the root *d-w-d* (cf. *yedíd, dodím, dadím, dudaím*) probably means “finding favor in the eyes of men” (Prov. 3:4, cf.).

(19) Both Mephiboshet’s and Achitophel’s name were degrading nicknames and not the original names of the two.

(20) It may well be that the author of the *Volksbuch*, though, as we have gathered, he knew his Book of Samuel quite well, had only a little Hebrew, and turned to a Jew for information. When in such an encounter he pronounced the word Achitophel, his informant must have corrected him saying: “We Ashkenasi Jews do not call that man Achitophel as it is written in your Greek and German Bibles, but *Achiteufel*”. Nothing could have been of a greater surprise and given more pleasure to the writer because *Teufel* means devil in German! This, one hopes, clinches the argument.

Most of the subtle allusions to biblical sources were, one may well imagine, highly enjoyed by the readers of the *Volksbuch* when the Bible had become accessible to them in their mothertongue and was the only book they owned, read and re-read. A mere century later, in the wake of increasing availability of variegated reading matter in print and of decreasing religious faith and occultism, things changed rapidly. What previously had “rung a bell” with readers became slowly lost upon them until it did not mean a thing anymore.

Any investigation in matters biblical must consult post-biblical sources such as Talmud and Midrash. The search there for helpful references proved to be in vain.

Giving Faust’s devilish mentor a Hebrew name had a welcome side-effect to help further to demonize Jews who were anyhow hated in Germany. That the previously flourishing communities there had long ago ceased to exist was immaterial: to hate them there was no need ever to have seen one in the flesh. That the Jew Achitophel had betrayed his master and hanged himself in despair must have reminded everybody of another Jew who had committed the same crime and died in the same manner, and who, moreover and most appropriately, was named Judas. Moreover, two Gospels (Lk. 22:6ff. and Joh. 13:26) report that Satan entered his body.

We do not know who was responsible for naming Faust’s perfidious mentor Mephistopheles, yet one thing is certain: his choice was excellently and cleverly contrived.

A few last words about *portemanteau*. It is an old literary trick: probably its most ancient occurrence is in the Bible. A man whom Scripture prefers to leave anonymous is named in Ruth 4:1 *peloni almoni*, while the author of Daniel, who must have known this source, called in 8:13, with the same purpose, a person *palmon*, a contraction of the former two words noticed already by Rabbi Abraham ibn Esra in his commentary to Lev. 11:22. Today we meet similar made-up words: famous instances are Oxbridge, Franglais and autobus, while Lewis Carroll in the poem *Jabberwocky* in his *Alice Through the Looking Glass* coined *slithy* (= slimy+lithe) and *chortle* (=chuckle+snort). Also, a paper read at a recent symposium (Heidelberg University) on English poetry was titled *Baconspeare*. To finish in a lighter vein: certain assimilationist German-Jewish families are said to have celebrated in winter the Feast of Weihnukka while Alsatian country Jews, when speaking of their religion in front of Gentiles in order to conceal it from them, called it *Arbacanfession*.

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