

The Variegated Career of Exodus 13:16

being a summary of the antics real and perceived of a biblical verse from antiquity until the rabbinic period

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The Variegated Career of Exodus 13:16

We're tracing the career of Exodus 13:16, *And it shall be a sign upon your hand and totafot between your eyes, as with a strong hand YHVH brought us out from Egypt.*

We're interested in this verse particularly as a background study for tefillin, as this verse and its parallels are popularly given as the foundation for the mitzvah of tefillin. However, the verse has not always been taken this way. Originally it probably meant nothing of the sort, and shortly after a tefillin-type practice developed more or less independently of the biblical text, the verses were utilised as the basis for many of the ritual's distinctive elements, by ingenious exegesis in the hands of the early rabbis.

Inner-biblical considerations

והיה לאות על ידכה ולטוטפת בין עיניך כי בחזק יד הוציאנו יהוה ממצרים

The verse divides into two parts—the first of a sign associated with the hand and eyes, and the second of the significant act it commemorates, the strong hand of God causing the exodus from Egypt. In keeping with the general tendency of Tanakh to repeat itself, the strong hand (of God and otherwise) appears many times, perhaps particularly in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and of course the exodus from Egypt is a recurring theme. Taking this generality as a background, we focus on the sign of hand and eye, of which there are three direct parallels in Torah: Exodus 13:9, Deuteronomy 6:8, and Deuteronomy 11:18.

והיה לך לאות על ירך ולזכרון בין עיניך למען תהיה תורת יהוה בפיוך כי ביד חזקה הוצאך יהוה ממצרים	ש' יג:ט
והיה לאות על ידכה ולטוטפת בין עיניך כי בחזק יד הוציאנו יהוה ממצרים	ש' יג:טז

ד' ו:ח	וקשרתם לאות על ידך והיו לטטפת בין עיניך
ד' יא:יה	ושמתם את דברי אלה על לבבכם ועל נפשכם וקשרתם אתם לאות על ידכם והיו לטטפת בין עיניכם

The common elements are the *presence* (in Exodus) or *binding* (in Deuteronomy) of a *sign*; on the *hand/s*; as a *totafot* or *zikaron*; between the *eyes*.

For Deuteronomy 6:8, this is all. The others also have another clause. In Exodus it is a subsequent clause which gives a rationale, *since God brought you out from Egypt*; in Deuteronomy it is a parallel, preceding clause bidding placement of the words upon the heart and soul.

This section of Exodus, 13:1-16, reads as something of an afterthought, a legal insertion into a story. The long narrative of the plagues and the first passover meal is followed by the instruction to repeat the ritual meal every year in commemoration; we then have the short but denser matter of 1:16. Karel van der Toorn identifies a layered process of compilation of Deuteronomy, successive "editions" identifiable by introductory and colophonic sections.¹ We might reasonably identify Exodus 13:1-16 as a similar colophonic section; a narrative is paused for a parenthetical injunction to observe the passover meal every year, and an editor at some point, before resuming the narrative, adds an extra valediction in this flurry of rules and exhortations. Per Fishbane, the patchwork of the biblical text went through multiple rounds of exegetical revisions and clarifications during its long compilation; here we see a seam.²

¹ Toorn, K. v. d. (2007). Scribal culture and the making of the Hebrew Bible. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

² Fishbane, M. (1996). Inner-Biblical Exegesis. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. M. Saebo.

By the rabbinic period, these verses have been firmly attached to a literal practice of binding words to the body. Were the verses understood this way in the biblical period? What *is* a totafot? A zikaron?

Concerning *totafot*, we observe that the word occurs nowhere else in Tanakh, and that its origins and original meaning are obscure despite much effort. Tigay argues convincingly from artistic and philological perspectives that it was originally a singular noun whose referent was a type of headband worn in by ancient Syro-Palestinians.³ This meaning seems to have become obscured in later times, certainly by the time the Septuagint made its translation in the 3rd century BCE, as we shall see.

Even so, there is no archaeological evidence to suggest any kind of tefillin-like ritual in ancient Israel.⁴ Further, the Deuteronomy text clearly contains at least some element of metaphor, as there is no way to literally place words upon one's literal heart and soul. Other verses in Tanakh echo the Deuteronomist, such as Shir haShirim's *Place me as a seal upon thine heart* (8:6) or Proverbs' *Let not truth and mercy forsake thee; bind them about thy neck; write them upon the tablet of thine heart* (3:3)⁵. The Deuteronomy passages also follow the instruction to make a sign on the hand with the additional instruction to write upon the doorposts; where later tradition, as we shall see, melds the two into one, it is not unreasonable to read them as a progression of ideas: bear the ideas in one's consciousness, and, further, inscribe the words upon a surface.

The Bible also contains passages in which wearing an item is unambiguously commanded.

Consider Exodus 28:36-38, which describes not only the existence of the high priest's *tzitz* but

³ Tigay, J. H. (1982). "On the Meaning of t (w) tpt." *Journal of Biblical Literature* **101**(3): 321-331.

⁴ Cohn, Y. (2008). *Tangled up in text : tefillin and the ancient world*. Providence, R.I., Brown Judaic Studies.

⁵ Also 6:21 and 7:3.

also the inscription thereon and the manner in which it is to be attached to the person. Consider also *Vayomer*, which commands attaching a thread of blue to the corners of one's garments—not only is the material specified, but the reason for so behaving, to be a reminder for the generations. When the Pentateuchal authors wish to specify wearing something, they are able to do so.

In an exploration of Hebrew amulet practice, we should mention the Ketef Hinnom plaques, although they do not contain our verses. These little silver plaques may be the earliest citations of biblical texts, or rather the earliest forerunners of texts that would later be part of the Bible. Barkay combines archeological and paleographical evidence to date them to the sixth or seventh century BCE.⁶ Their text approximates Num 6:24-26, the Priestly Blessing, although they lack *וייהנה* and *ישא ה' פניו אליך*. Cohn comprehensively dismisses the plaques as tefillin forerunners; except in that they are minute inscribed biblical texts, they bear no especial resemblance to tefillin as we know them, and it is a stretch of implausible dimensions to see them as related practices. However, their unexpected formulation of the verses leads us neatly into the concept of the biblical text at this date being fluid, both in composition and orthography.

Our verse and its parallels have some spelling variants which will later form exegetical fodder, as we shall see. However, at the time of their composition, these spellings were not significant; early spelling of the biblical text was decidedly fluid. This is a function of Hebrew orthography, in which the choice of whether to indicate vowels with letters (yud, hey, vav) depends to some

⁶ Barkay, G., M. J. Lundberg, A. G. Vaughn and B. Zuckerman (2004). "The amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A new edition and evaluation." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*: 41-71. Barkay, G. (1992). "The Priestly Benediction on Silver Plaques from Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem." *Tel Aviv* 1992(2): 139-192.

extent on etymological factors but largely on the scribe's preference. In the pre-rabbinic period, precise spellings of words had not yet become a theological principle.⁷

ידכה is one instance where the scribe had a choice of spelling; the Masoretic Text more usually has ידך, but ידכה is a legitimate phonetic spelling. נתתה is another such; there are various other examples scattered throughout the biblical text. Early Hebrew inscriptions contain relatively few vowel-letters; over time, their use becomes more standard. It is not clear why: Kahle thought it indicated a development in pronunciation, from an early *-akh* ending to a later *-akha* ending, whereas Kutscher saw the final hey as a response to *-akh* endings in Aramaic dialect forms. The Qumran texts as a whole have rather more final heys like these than the Masoretic Text, which is generally more conservative, i.e. lighter on vowel-letters.⁸ The manuscripts of Exodus mostly don't have our verses, but 4QExod^d has the variant spelling טטפוח.⁹

Thus it is that *totafot* appears as טוטפת and as טטפת (and in later literature as טוטפוח). "By 600BCE the practice, if not the rule, was to spell all primal long vowels and long vowels derived from diphthongs *plene*. By the time of the Mishnah the rule, if not the practice, outside the Bible at least, was to spell *all* long vowels *plene*. This represented a complete movement from historical to phonetic spelling. If the Bible had been fully modernised, the result would have been a text in which all long vowels, whatever their origin, are spelled *plene*."¹⁰

⁷ Toorn, K. v. d. (2007). Scribal culture and the making of the Hebrew Bible. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press. Tov, E. (2001). Textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible. Minneapolis Assen, Fortress Press ; Royal Van Gorcum.

⁸ Barr, J. (1989). The variable spellings of the Hebrew Bible. Oxford ; New York, Published for the British Academy by the Oxford University Press.

⁹ Ulrich, E., F. M. Cross and J. R. Davila (1995). Discoveries in the Judean Desert: Volume XII. Qumran Cave 4: VII: Genesis to Numbers, Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Andersen, F. I. and A. D. Forbes (1986). Spelling in the Hebrew Bible : Dahood memorial lecture. Rome, Biblical Institute Press.

Tefillin from the Judean Desert

The finds in the Judean Desert divide into two categories: manuscripts of Exodus, mentioned above, and the various miniature slips, and housings thereof, identified as tefillin or mezuzot, which we shall now consider in more detail.

The tefillin and mezuzot from Qumran and the Judean Desert were found (or purchased) in various states. Some arrived in housings, suggesting that they were worn on the body. The other pieces of writing identified as tefillin and mezuzot are essentially diagnosed by being small amounts of tightly-folded text in very tiny script, and scholars then argue as to whether a particular text should be considered tefillin or mezuzot.¹¹ Milik distinguished them by factors such as thickness of parchment and calligraphic style, which is all very well as far as it goes but not exactly conclusive, and in any case there is very little evidence that they were being used as rabbinic Jews use mezuzah-scrolls; they could have been some other type of amulet.¹²

The texts in the slips identified as tefillin vary a good deal, even limiting oneself to texts found with housings. Selections are generally from Exod 12:43-13:16, Deut 5:1-6:9, and Deut 10:12-11:21, but with no further common factors. The sections we today associate with tefillin often, but not always, appear. This variation suggests that the association between tefillin and today's tefillin-verses was by no means clear from the beginning. It seems rather that people were inclined to use small pieces of inscribed text in a physical way, probably informed by the very

¹¹ Milik, J. "Tefillin, Mezuzot et Targums." Discoveries in the Judaean Desert 6.

¹² Compare the Nash Papyrus, considerably earlier and from the Alexandrian Diaspora. It also contains the Decalogue, but a sort of Frankendecalogue made by cobbling together parts of the Exodus Decalogue and parts of the Deuteronomy Decalogue, apparently from a Septuagint-like text. It also has the first two verses of the Shema, and may once have had more. Some suggest the papyrus was a sort of early prayer-book, "the daily worship of a pious Jew," and some suggest that it was "the contents of a phylactery." Greenberg, M. (2007). Nash Papyrus. Encyclopedia Judaica. S. e. al. Evidently Jews have long found reason to inscribe small pieces of text on slips; what they then did with them is unclear.

broad use of amulets in contemporary culture, and that the Jews engaged in this activity were, over time, harmonising an amuletic practice with a scriptural awareness.

That is, if "place these words upon your arm" was originally metaphorical, once we surround Jews with a culture of wearing inscribed texts—to ward off illness or bad luck, or to invoke health or success—the text would take on an additional layer of meaning. What, then, is one to make of "these words"? The passage commanding the placing of the words, yes; but as we have seen, "these words" can refer to the Torah, or to wisdom—or apparently to a representative selection of both in the form of the Decalogue. Finally, many of the texts focus on the redemption of the firstborn. While this doesn't immediately suggest itself as relevant subject-matter, the Exodus verses do say that the binding of the words is intended as a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt, and Scripture's description of how to commemorate that event has a good deal of focus on the paschal meal and the redemption of the firstborn, so it fits as an associated theme. Today the verses about the firstborn are included along with the sections about placing the words as a sign, but that part is not always included in the Judean Desert tefillin.

Tefillin in their earliest incarnations, then, seem not to have been precisely an act of practical exegesis, unlike tzitzit, for instance. The exegesis makes distinctively Jewish a practice which is somewhat widespread but rooted in non-Jewish culture. Somewhat as the oil miracle gave a Jewish religious tone to the civil celebration of Chanukah,¹³ the use of biblical verses give a specifically-Jewish religious tone to the general Hellenistic practice of wearing amulets.

When did this happen? Likely in the Second Temple period. We see, among the early Hellenist writers, a decided lack of references to a practical interpretation of our verse. Now, the literature

¹³ Noam, V. (2002). "The miracle of the cruse of oil: The metamorphosis of a legend." Hebrew Union College Annual: 191-226.

of the Qumran community also has no references whatsoever to wearing tefillin, so we cannot assume that no mention means no practice, but we also see in Greek literature some references to our verse which seem to indicate a general non-practical understanding of the verse.

Early 3rd Century BCE—Egyptian Diaspora

Prior to Alexander the Great's conquest of the East, there seems to have been relatively little contact between the Greeks and Judeans. Feldman suggests the barrier may have been geographical, like Josephus, or perhaps the Greeks of the time were simply not especially interested in Judea and its inhabitants.¹⁴ Regardless, once the cultures mix, Jews and their culture and heritage come to make more of an impression on the Greek collective consciousness.

The Septuagint rises from about the third century BCE to meet the needs of Koine Greek speakers interested in Jewish culture (whether from the legendary external perspective of Ptolemy II or the more prosaic internal perspective of monolingual Jews).

For the sake of comparison, we bring our verse and its three parallels, from the Septuagint with Brenton's translation in to English.

Exodus 13:16		
καὶ ἔσται εἰς σημεῖον ἐπὶ τῆς χειρός σου καὶ ἀσάλευτον πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν σου· ἐν γὰρ χειρὶ κραταιᾷ ἐξήγαγέ σε Κύριος ἐξ Αἰγύπτου.	Kai estai eis sēmeion epi tēs cheiros sou kai asaleuton pro ophthalmōn sou; en gar cheiri krataia exēgage se Kyrios ex Aigypou.	And it shall be for a sign upon thy hand, and immovable before thine eyes, for with a strong hand the Lord brought thee out of Egypt.
Exodus 13:9		
καὶ ἔσται σοι σημεῖον ἐπὶ τῆς χειρός σου καὶ μνημόσυνον πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν σου, ὅπως ἂν	kai estai soi sēmeion epi tēs cheiros sou kai mnēmosynon pro ophthalmōn sou, hopōs an	And it shall be to thee a sign upon thy hand and a memorial before thine eyes, that the law

¹⁴ Feldman, L. H. (1993). Jew and Gentile in the ancient world : attitudes and interactions from Alexander to Justinian. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.

γένηται ὁ νόμος Κυρίου ἐν τῷ στόματί σου· ἐν γὰρ χειρὶ κραταιᾷ ἐξήγαγέ σε Κύριος ὁ Θεὸς ἐξ Αἰγύπτου.	genētai ho nomos Kyriou en tō stomati sou; en gar cheiri krataia exēgage se Kyrios ho Theos ex Aigyptou.	of the Lord may be in thy mouth, for with a strong hand the Lord God brought thee out of Egypt.
Deuteronomy 6:8		
καὶ ἀφάψεις αὐτὰ εἰς σημεῖον ἐπὶ τῆς χειρὸς σου, καὶ ἔσται ἀσάλευτον πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν σου	kai aphapseis auta eis sēmeion epi tēs cheiros sou, kai estai asaleuton pro ophthalmōn sou	And thou shalt fasten them for a sign upon thy hand, and it shall be immoveable before thine eyes
Deuteronomy 11:18		
καὶ ἐμβαλεῖτε τὰ ρήματα ταῦτα εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ὑμῶν καὶ εἰς τὴν ψυχὴν ὑμῶν· καὶ ἀφάψετε αὐτὰ εἰς σημεῖον ἐπὶ τῆς χειρὸς ὑμῶν, καὶ ἔσται ἀσάλευτον πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν ὑμῶν	kai embaleite ta rēmata tauta eis tēn kardian hymōn kai eis tēn psychēn hymōn; kai aphapsete auta eis sēmeion epi tēs cheiros hymōn, kai estai asaleuton pro ophthalmōn hymōn	And ye shall store these words in your heart and in your soul, and ye shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and it shall be fixed before your eyes.

We see that *zikaron* carries the connotation of "reminder," rather than "memorial." The translation is otherwise literal, including translating "hand" literally—the translator seems not to fear anthropomorphism—and *totafot* is translated *asaleuton*, an adjective meaning "unmoving." However, another Septuagint variant—and it is notoriously difficult to say which of the variants carries most authority—has *saleuton* in place of *asaleuton*¹⁵. One is immovable, the other continually mobile.

This is helpful from a realia perspective: translating *totafot* as an adjective already suggests a lack of concrete interpretation of the verse; translating it in two completely incompatible ways suggests that at the time of translation, or perhaps of recension, it was anybody's guess what the word meant. Cohn points out that the *lectio difficilior* is *saleuton*, the continually-moving interpretation. Cohn tends towards thinking that the original understanding was metaphorical, but that this metaphorical understanding of the verse was later amended to *asaleuton*, perhaps

¹⁵ Wevers, J. W. and U. Quast (1991). *Exodus*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

following the development of a tefillin-type practice, which would encourage an "unmoving" understanding of *totafot*. Others¹⁶ prefer to conceive of tefillin having originally been pendant-like objects which dangled and jiggled directly in front of the eyes, which sounds extraordinarily impractical but would support a reading of *saleuton*.

Early Hellenist writers

Among the Greco-Roman authors (as presented by Stern, by and large) we find a few references to amulets, and one or two references which could perhaps be taken as referring to tefillin. The exodus seems to have been much less of a theological pivot than it later became; the Jews are the people of Moses (Artapanus carries this to an extreme, giving Moses credit for inventing practically everything), and the identity narratives from Genesis have accompanied them. The Temple is of passing interest, and the political wranglings of Judea, along with some of its more unusual geographical features, are mentioned, but of the exodus and the legal material there is little trace.

The material comes to us at several removes, though. The Greeks, per Feldman, seem to have been not especially interested in Jews; most of what we have comes from Hellenistic Jews writing about their own traditions and preserving what little material they found in the Greek corpus. With the decline of Hellenistic civilisation, what remains to us was preserved by Christians, who may not have felt the need to preserve biblical material which was not directly relevant to their own concerns.

¹⁶ Weinfeld, M. (1991). Deuteronomy 1-11 : a new translation with introduction and commentary. New York, Doubleday. Weinfeld follows Cohen, of whom more below.

The Sabbath and circumcision, and an aversion to pigs, seem to be the main features of the Jews as understood by the non-Jewish Greek authors. Some aspects of Jewish life are either misunderstood or very different than we know them today, such as Suetonius' description of Shabbat as a fast day, and Strabo's understanding that Jews circumcise all their children, not just the male ones. Cassius Dio describes Jewish life as being composed of "peculiar observances."¹⁷

Over time, we see increasing familiarity with Jews and Jewish thought; as Christianity became more of a problem, an understanding of Judaism (as the root of the trouble) became necessary in order to show how invalid and illogical Christianity was. This seems to manifest in two ways—the sympathetic camp which actually rather likes Jews (Numenius of Apamea), and Celsus and his ilk, who hold that Judaism plagiarises its legends from the Greek pantheon and what little wisdom it possesses from Plato. However, we shall return to the Christian era anon.

The first early Greek reference of more than glancing relevance to our verse is from the Jewish philosopher Aristobulus of Paneas, around 160BCE. It is preserved in Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* (8.9.38-10.18a), whose general project seems to be to demonstrate that the Law as done by the Jews is well-founded and philosophically sound. Aristobulus addresses the question of how God can be said to have limbs: "...the hands are thought of in terms of the power of God. For truly, it is possible to think metaphorically that all men's strength and activities are in their hands. Thus quite appropriately has the lawgiver spoken metaphorically in an expanded sense in saying that the accomplishments of God are his hands..."

¹⁷ Irrelevantly but delightfully, Aelius Aristides identifies Jews as "the impious who live in Palestina...the sign of their impiety consists in that they do not recognize their betters."

We find the ordination of the passover feast, to be observed by the generations, mentioned by Eusebius, but no corresponding injunction regarding sanctification of the firstborn, or distinction in dress.

Aristeas, or rather the letter ascribed to Aristeas, in the second century BCE, deals with the present situation and practice of the Jews, for an Alexandrian audience, and their philosophy and morals. The following section is of note:

157-161 For he has marked out every time and place that we may continually remember the God who rules and preserves (us). For in the matter of meats and drinks he bids us first of all offer part as a sacrifice and then forthwith enjoy our meal. Moreover, upon our garments he has given us a symbol of remembrance, and in like manner he has ordered us to put the divine oracles upon our gates and doors as a remembrance of God. And upon our hands, too, he expressly orders the symbol to be fastened, clearly showing that we ought to perform every act in righteousness, remembering (our own creation), and above all the fear of God. He bids men also, when lying down to sleep and rising up again, to meditate upon the works of God, not only in word, but by observing distinctly the change and impression produced upon them, when they are going to sleep, and also their waking, how divine and incomprehensible the change from one of these states to the other is.

Those who seek rabbinic Judaism in extra-biblical sources cite this passage as the earliest description of tefillin on the arm—and only on the arm; not also on the head. Does this mean that Alexandrian Jews practiced only arm-tefillin? Or perhaps it means that the passage is simply a paraphrase of the Septuagint verse, and is not referring to an actual daily practice. One might argue either way; see Cohn. It is perhaps instructive to compare this passage with the description of the high priest's garments (98):

On his head he wore a tiara, as it is called, and upon this in the middle of his forehead an inimitable turban, the royal diadem full of glory with the name of God inscribed in sacred letters on a plate of gold...

That is, the high priest's headwear is described in some detail, whereas the "symbol" worn on the hand is not given physical form. The "symbol of remembrance" upon the garments is not described either, unlike the high priest's garments. Perhaps one might have expected a little more detail were the author describing everyday things.

Regardless of whether he is describing a tangible interpretation, our verse and its general concern of remembrance are clearly of concern to Aristeas, apparently more so than the Moses narrative preceding it.

Philo, still in Alexandria but writing somewhat later (c. 25 BCE- c. 50 CE), causes scholars much perplexity with his rendering of these verses.

Book 4 of *On the Special Laws*, chapter 26, 137-139:

The law says, it is proper to lay up justice in one's heart, and to fasten it as a sign upon one's head, and as frontlets before one's eyes...by the third expression, he implies that justice is discerned everywhere as being close to the eyes. Moreover he says that, these things must have a certain motion; not one that shall be light and unsteady, but such as by its agitation may rouse the sight to the spectacle manifest before it; for motion is calculated to attract the sight, inasmuch as it excites and rouses it; of, I might rather say, inasmuch as it renders the eyes awake and sleepless.

Philo presents as a reasonably educated and committed rabbinic Jew, one who had visited the Temple in Jerusalem, who was able to produce multiple books outlining and justifying a solid

practice of rabbinic Judaism. However, contemporary Jews like to think that such a Jew would have observed the practice of laying tefillin. How, then, is it possible for Philo to take such a figurative interpretation of placing the law before one's eyes? Naomi Cohen is particular to explain that Philo's Judaism featured mobile head-tefillin; she takes exception to the suggestion that Philo was aware of a general tefillin-type practice but was somewhat hazy on the exact details.¹⁸

Philo also wrote a *Questions and Answers on Exodus*, which is extant only in an Armenian version; we here use Ralph Marcus' translation in the Loeb library. Of Exodus 12:11, Philo asks "(Why) does He command (everyone) to eat, having a girdle and shoes and a staff? All the things mentioned are an indication of the manner of journeying of those who are in haste. For it is the custom of those who are about to travel a long way to wear shoes and to be girt with a girdle and to take a staff for their needs, because shoes protect the feet, while girding oneself makes movement easier for the legs, and a staff is useful to lean on and to drive away poisonous reptiles and other beasts. This, then suffices for the explanation of the literal meaning. But as for the deeper meaning, this must be said. The girdles represent drawing together and the coming together of the sensual pleasures and other passions, which, being, as it were, released and let go, overtake all souls. Wherefore not ineptly does He add that one must have a girdle about the middle, for this place is considered as the manger of the many-headed beast of desire within us. And the staves seem to represent a royal, disciplinary and stable form, for the rod is a symbol of kingship and an instrument of discipline for those who are unable to act prudently without being scolded. And it is a figure of unmoving and stable souls

¹⁸ Cohen, N. G. (1995). *Philo Judaeus : his universe of discourse*. Frankfurt am Main ; New York, P. Lang.

which abandon whatever inclines to either side and in two (directions). And the shoes indicate the covering and protection of one who is engaged in hurrying not on a trackless way but on a well-travelled and worn path which leads to virtue..." and continues in similar vein.

He has nothing whatsoever to say about either of our Exodus verses. It seems unlikely that an author who can wax so lyrical about the superficial and deeper meanings of girdles, staves, and shoes should wish to say nothing at all about a practice of literally binding God's words upon one's literal body, unless he had no especial idea that people might be doing such a thing.

Apocrypha & pseudepigrapha

Our verses fare poorly in the apocryphal material. Three books feature the Exodus theme in some way, and one has a brief mention of amulets, albeit specifically amulets invoking foreign gods.

We're interested in the Exodus theme because our verse seems explicitly interested in being brought out from Egypt, and lacking specific commentary on this exact verse, we broadened our scope to look at the Exodus theme in general.

Jubilees (c.135-105 BCE) gives a brief account of the exodus, against its lengthy treatment of Genesis, and ordains the passover ritual. The Wisdom of Solomon, in chapter 10, more or less writes God out of the exodus entirely, and replaces God with the character of Wisdom—an acceptable philosophical gambit, to be sure, if distinctly at odds with the theme of our verse.

Achior's speech in Judith connects Jewish identity to the exodus, which is more promising;

Achior is an Ammonite telling Holofernes why people don't mess with the Jews—because they

have a rather powerful god who looks after them and brought them out of Egypt. However, this is all.

Evidence of a belief in the general efficacy of amulets is found in 2 Maccabees 12:40; Judas Maccabaeus goes to collect the bodies of his fallen comrades after a battle, and "under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. So it was clear to all that this was why these men had fallen."

A pivotal moment of practical exegesis

Cohn places the tefillin-ritual's roots in the Hasmonean period, a part of the development of Jewish ritual which was taking place at this time, and in particular a response to the ubiquitous use of amulets in Hellenistic culture and the ancient world in general; a Jewish specialisation of a magical ritual. (He devotes more or less his entire book to the presentation of this thesis, and we will not reproduce it here.) The ritual emerges, and the verses, after some experiments, are settled upon sometime between 165 BCE, when the Hasmonean leadership came into power and Judaism started to reshape, and the second century CE or so.

Josephus, in book IV of the *Antiquities*, explains wearing inscriptions on the forehead and the arm (which sounds a lot like tefillin) as a visible symbol of God's power and goodwill to the Jewish people—rather in keeping with Josephus' general project of presenting the Jews as God's people. From here on, tefillin are more or less established in Jewish culture; we start with the literature of the people, the Targumim.

Targumim

The function of the Targumim is arguably to render the Hebrew text comprehensible to an Aramaic-speaking audience, and the amount of exegetical material added to the verses in the name of comprehension varies between targumim.¹⁹ All of them are held to have a tendency to avoid anthropomorphic descriptors of God, and it is instructive, therefore, to explore how the Targumim render *בְּחֶזֶק יָד* in our verse.

Onkelos (which is the Targum used in Babylon, but which likely had Palestinian roots²⁰) gives *בְּתַקוּף יָדָא*, but with some manuscript confusion as to which should be the noun and which the adjective, *בִּידָא תְּקִיפָא* appearing as a variant. The former could be an effort to avoid giving God literal hands, but the Bible also switches the terms around, in the different places where the concept recurs; it could just as likely reflect the original's apparent lack of concern for word order. Neofiti gives *בִּידָא תְּקִיפָא*, and Pseudo-Jonathan the cautious *בְּתַקוּף גְּבוּרַת יָדָא*.

In 13:9, where the Hebrew has *בִּידָא חֶזֶקָה*, Onkelos and his variant readings also have the reversed word order, Neofiti has the same *בִּידָא תְּקִיפָא* as in verse 16 (as does the Septuagint, we might note, keeping the same phrase for the concept and not troubling overmuch about the original word order), and Pseudo-Jonathan *בְּחֵיל יָדָא תְּקִיפָתָא*. The Samaritan targum matches the Hebrew word order in each verse.

It seems that Onkelos (and Neofiti) is not particularly worried that the reader is going to understand God in this verse as having literal hands; compare the popular notion that this targum

¹⁹ Although we note with interest Tal's idea that the point of an Aramaic Targum is to preserve the integrity of the Hebrew text against Aramaicisation by giving the Aramaic rendering its own version—compare to Kutscher's intertextual defence against "Aramaic creep" in the form of spellings such as *יִדְכָה*. Tal, A. (2001). "Is there a *raison d'être* for an Aramaic Targum in a Hebrew-speaking society?" *Revue des études juives* 160(3-4): 357-378.

²⁰ Levine, E. (1996). The Targums. *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*. M. Saebo.

is deeply concerned to avoid giving God body parts, by translating "arm" and "hand" more usually as "strength."

Yet we cannot say that Onkelos' understanding of the verse is wholly metaphorical, with no risk at all that one would read these hands as being literally God's, because of the translation of *totafot*. He translates what appears on the hand literally, תא, but translates *totafot* (consistently in all three locations) as *tefillin*. Depending on whether one dates Onkelos before the corpus of midrashei halakha, this might be the first definite such interpretation of the verse, as certainly meaning *tefillin*.

In 13:9, Onkelos retains *zikaron* (or *dukhran*, anyway), which Neofiti modifies to *dukhran tav*, which descriptive phrase is how it translates *totafot* in 13:16. However, in Deuteronomy—perhaps guided by the Deuteronomist's descriptive *and thou shalt bind them*—he translates *totafot* as *tefillin*. Neofiti plainly understands 13:16 to be referring to some sort of *tefillin* practice, though, as it translates *yad* as actually *arm*, and על בית אפיכון בין עיניך as *upon your face*, as also in Deuteronomy.

The Samaritan tradition, not adopting the Rabbanite practice of *tefillin*, translates the incomprehensible *totafot* with the equally-incomprehensible *tafin* and leaves everything else literal.

It is left to Pseudo-Jonathan, arguably the latest of the targumim, to read the most into the verses. He translates verse 9 thus: *It shall be for you a sign of the law, engraved and explained (חקיקה ומפרש) on the tefila of the hand, on the highest part of your left arm, and as a zikaron engraved and explained on the tefila of the head, fixed facing your eye on the highest part of your head, in order that the Torah of YY shall be in your mouth, as with the strength of a mighty hand YY*

brought you out of Egypt. Verse 16 is essentially a more concise restatement: *It shall be a sign engraved and explained upon your left hand and tefillin between your eyelids, as with the strength of this hand YY brought you out of Egypt.*

The emphasis on the *highest part* of the arm and head, repeated in Deuteronomy, clearly parallels the midrashei halakha, as we shall now see.

Halakhic Midrashim and Talmudic Literature

Tefillin, by the time of the mishnah, appear to be firmly established in the rabbinic consciousness. The Mishnah and Tosefta mention tefillin in passing, but discuss the verses therein not at all. This is in keeping with the general trend of Mishnah and Tosefta to focus on the executive aspects of Judaism. It's in the midrashei halakha that we find the in-depth discussions of our verse.

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael is explicit that the mitzvah of tefillin is mentioned in four places in Torah, and that these are the passages to be featured.²¹

Although the midrashei halakha and the Talmuds are separate works, they preserve many of the same traditions, and the Bavli in particular contains very little exegetical matter which does not also appear in the midrash halakha. Accordingly, in this section we shall simply explore the various ideas which have been attached to the various parts of the verses (if this were a study of tefillin in a sociological context rather than an exegetical one, it would be expedient to treat the talmudic and midrash halakha sources separately). When the Talmud adds something new, we have cited it. As the material in Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael is also to be found in Sifrei Devarim, we have featured just the Mekhilta.

²¹ All Mekhilta references are in *Bo* unless otherwise stated.

Many rabbinic practices come with an amazing quantity of laws attached; one has only to look at any of the medieval codes to see this. Tefillin, like many other practices in rabbinic Judaism, go from being virtual nonentities to highly-regulated items. The square shape of the tefillin, the grooves between the compartments, the manner in which the strap passes through the pouch, the colour of the straps, and the straps' being knotted, are all said to be rules given to Moses on Sinai and not derived biblically. If one considers tefillin as a quasi-magical rite but one to be done in a particularistic Jewish way, it makes sense that a large number of special rules would have to have been formulated and strongly asserted as divine in origin.

Even with this unusually dense concentration of *halakhot lemoshe misinai*, the verses to which the tefillin ritual are anchored earn their keep. They are used to prove that one should wear the tefillin discreetly under one's clothing; the tefillin are worn on the left arm, on the upper part of the arm, and on the high part of the head; there are four sections contained in one roll in one pouch, for the arm-tefila, and four sections in four compartments in one pouch for the head-tefila; one puts on the arm-tefila first and takes off the head-tefila first; they are not worn on holy days; their wearing is restricted to a specific group of people; they are intended for a reminder of the exodus.

Many of the exegetical concepts, such as the links between **על ירך** and **בין עיניך**, are listed under expositions of 13:9, but since they could apply equally well in 13:16, since the phrasing of the verse is more or less identical, we shall include them here.

והיה לך לאות על ירך ולזכרון בין עיניך למען תהיה תורת יהוה בפיך כי ביד חזקה הוצאך יהוה ממצרים

והיה לאות על ידכה ולטוטפת בין עיניך כי בחזק יד הוציאנו יהוה ממצרים

לָלֶּ, in 13:9, is apparently a superfluous word—13:16 manages perfectly well without it. The Mekhilta emphasises this point, saying "to *you* and not to others," in reference to wearing the hand-tefila on one's upper arm, concealed under the sleeve (b. Menahot 37b adds a story about a rabbi whose arm-tefila was visible through a tear, and this raised eyebrows). This is an example of the idea that superfluous words in the text carry meaning. Which came first—the idea of wearing the tefillin under the sleeve, or the idea that this לָלֶּ has hidden meaning? Likely the former, since this is the rabbinic project in general—attaching Jewish practice to biblical verses—but there are probably exceptions.

The exegetes concern themselves with the singular-yet-plural nature of the verse's subject. On the one hand, the words are to be a singular *ot* and *zikaron*. On the other, *totafot* appears to be a plural word. Both three-cell and four-cell tefillin were found at Qumran, so the midrashic focus on *four* sections is telling. We have evidence of three- and four-cell tefillin from Qumran; in order to secure the practice of *four* sections, the word *totafot* is utilised in two different ways.²² One, attributed to Rabbi Akiva, uses the strangeness of the word as the proof: otherwise unattested, *tot* is said to mean "two" in one language, "pat" means two in another, and so the two foreign syllables combined signify four. As a method of exegesis, this is somewhat unusual; rabbinic sources do not usually come to understand words by translating them into completely unrelated languages.

Four is also derived via the spelling variations we noted above: *totafot* is spelled with varying numbers of vavs, which make it appear sometimes singular (טוטפת or טטפת) or plural (טוטפות, etc). Two singular and a plural make four. An interesting development with this particular

²² The Warsaw edition of Midrash Tanchuma, in *Bo*, somewhat oddly, adds two and two to get five. Five compartments in the tefillin are suggested as a straw-man in b. Zevachim 37b.

derivation is that despite their documented role underpinning a fairly well-established practice, this set of spellings did not make it into the Masoretic Text.

Having derived four sections in the tefillin, they are united into one object by *ot* (being singular) or by *zikaron*. For the hand-tefila, the Mekhilta is specific that the four paragraphs are written on one piece of hide; for the head-tefila, the four paragraphs are to be in four compartments made from one piece of hide.

Ot being singular and *totafot* being plural is used to explain that the hand-tefila is put on first, since then there is only one tefila on the body, and then the head-tefila, since then there are two; and the reverse when removing them.

Ot is also used to explain why tefillin are not worn on Sabbaths and festivals; here it is not the singularity but the nature of *a sign*, Rabbi Akiva explaining that the holy days are signs in and of themselves. The Yerushalmi, in one of its relatively rare forays into the subject, also explains *ot* in this way (Berakhot 2:3:14).

The verse has a parallel sort of formation between *on the hand* and *between the eyes*. This is taken to set up a logical equivalence between the two. Just in case one hadn't quite grasped that each sort of tefila contains four paragraphs, this equivalence (in the Mekhilta) hammers it home. Indeed, one may go so far as to convert a spare head-tefila into a hand-tefila by covering the four protruding compartments with another piece of leather.

The hand-eye equivalence is used most, though, in proving that "hand" means "bicep" and "eye" means "forehead." Both Mekhilta d'Rashbi and Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael bring circular reasoning which is then modified to feature logic. Essentially, the placement of the head-tefila on the highest part of the head is assumed, and hand-eye equivalence derives placing the hand-tefila

on the highest part of the hand, i.e. the bicep. Then the same idea is restated the other way round; the placement of the hand-tefila on the highest part of the hand is taken as a given, and the placement of the head-tefila derived from it. This is a very nice illustration of reverse-anchoring practices in verses—both lines of reasoning cannot have obtained simultaneously in the same community. Presumably realising this, the Mekhilta d'Rashbi goes back and derives "between the eyes" from a different verse before extrapolating to the hand, or alternatively, extrapolates from the hand to the head: "just as the hand-tefila is on a place which can become impure by touch, so too the head-tefila" (and see also b. Menahot 37a, b).

On your hand has more work to do than just this equivalence with *between your eyes*. It also serves as the basis for explaining why the hand-tefila is placed on the *left* arm. The practical explanation is that if one is going to tie something one-handed, it's far easier to have the dominant hand do the work; the Mekhilta's exegetical explanation looks at other verses where a *hand* is mentioned, and asserts that unless otherwise specified, Scripture defaults to the left hand. The Bavli (Menahot 37a) tries attaching the left-hand idea to the variant spelling ידכה—perhaps the hey signifies weakness?—but eventually settles for the formulation we saw in the Mekhilta.

למען תהיה תורת יי בפיה is applied in two main ways. First, since *the Torah of God is to be in your mouth*, the writing surface, housings, and stitches are to be made from animals fit to eat—the Yerushalmi (Megillah 1:9:12) clarifies here that kosher slaughter is not required provided the species is correct. Second, this phrase is used to limit performance of the practice only to those in whose mouths Torah is frequently to be found, thus exempting children and women but extending to converts and freed slaves.

Finally, כי בחזק יד "teaches that tefillin are a reminder of the exodus from Egypt."

So we have an overview of the enormous quantity of ritual specifications which are attached to the constituent verses by the early developers of halakha. This is without including the parallel Deuteronomy verses, which introduce the concept of *binding* associated with *writing*, and result in a tremendous exegetical frenzy all of their own.

Early Christianity

Early Christian literature—the New Testament, the Church Fathers—is slightly more interested in tefillin than in our verses, showing again that while formal exegesis ties tefillin tightly into certain verses, the practice has a life far beyond the page. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, aiming for a comprehensive collection, puts the focus of our Exodus passage on the consecration of the firstborn.²³ Origen (c. 184-253) is interested in the equivalent holiness of animals and people. Tertullian (c. 160-225) extrapolates from the holy status of the firstborn to the ultra-holy status of a virgin birth. A literal read (God does not desire the unclean ass) is followed by a metaphorical read (sheep are productive, but asses labour; as God desires the sheep and not the ass, produce is better than labour). The parallel passage in Deuteronomy 6 improves the occasion with much talk about threefold love and threefold divinity, and Deuteronomy 11 gets no attention at all.

The interest in tefillin comes from Matthew 23:5, in which Jesus criticises the hypocritical behaviour of the scribes and Pharisees, saying that they enlarge their phylacteries and make broad the hems of their garments in ostentatious piety. Given the ubiquity of amulets at this period, one should not automatically assume that Matthew's phylacteries were tefillin, but it

²³ Lienhard, J. T., R. J. Rombs and T. C. Oden (2001). Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press.

seems on the whole likely.²⁴ Commentaries on Matthew abound, but focus on the larger homiletic point. Clement of Alexandria's *Recognitions* is an early example (c. 150-215)—book 2, chapter 46, and his *Stromata*, in book 10, under the heading "To Act Well of greater Consequence than to Speak Well,"—" We ought never, then, out of desire for vainglory, to make broad the phylacteries."

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) mentions phylacteries in the Dialogue with Trypho (46.5):

Then I returned answer, "You perceive that God by Moses laid all such ordinances upon you on account of the hardness of your people's hearts, in order that, by the large number of them, you might keep God continually, and in every action, before your eyes, and never begin to act unjustly or impiously. For He enjoined you to place around you [a fringe] of purple dye, in order that you might not forget God; and He commanded you to wear a phylactery, certain characters, which indeed we consider holy, being engraved on very thin parchment; and by these means stirring you up to retain a constant remembrance of God: at the same time, however, convincing you, that in your hearts you have not even a faint remembrance of God's worship. (Schaff's edition)

Tefillin are evidently part of Jewish life, albeit a part Justin's Christianity would reject. Again, Jerome, in 398, in his Commentary on Matthew:

The Lord, when he gave the commandments of the Law through Moses, added at the end: "You will bind these on your hand and they will be unmoved before your eyes." And this is the meaning: My precepts are in your hand that they might be fulfilled in conduct. Let them be before your eyes for you to meditate on them day and night. The Pharisees,

²⁴ Tigay, J. H. (1979). "On the Term Phylacteries (Matt 23: 5)." *Harvard Theological Review* 72(1-2): 45-53.

interpreting this perversely, wrote on small parchments the Decalogue of Moses, that is, the ten words of the Law. Folding them up, they even bound them to their forehead and made a crown, so to speak, on their head, so that they would always be moving before their eyes.²⁵

Jerome clearly associates the phylacteries of Matthew with rabbinic tefillin, although he thinks that this is not the correct interpretation of the text. Of course, his identifying the contents as the Decalogue is interesting; we know that concept was still live among the rabbis of Jerome's time, from the Sifrei's discussion about why the Decalogue should *not* be included in tefillin, but it is interesting that it had reached Jerome.

Art

We sought our themes of interest among the published Jewish and Christian mosaics and frescoes of the Near East, in Goodenough's many volumes, and in Byzantine manuscript illumination (the earliest surviving Jewish manuscript illumination is from a little later).

Earlier we saw some little discomfort, in various textual sources, with the idea that God might literally have hands. Yet the hand of God is clearly drawn in multiple Binding of Isaac scenes.²⁶ Granted there are not many ways of graphically representing divine intervention, and a Divine Hand could be simply a symbol, not to be taken literally, but it is interesting that the hand ceases

²⁵ Jerome and T. P. Scheck (2008). Commentary on Matthew. Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press.

²⁶ For example Hachlili, R. (2009). Ancient mosaic pavements : themes, issues, and trends : selected studies. Leiden ; Boston, Brill.

to be drawn this way roughly as Islam gains traction (per Goodenough, for example). In any case, the hand of God as divine intervention is not shown vis-à-vis the Exodus.²⁷

The Exodus, like in the texts, does not feature a great deal, as revelation is grounded in the Temple and its impedimenta. Temple motifs abound. Dura does have a splitting-of-the-sea scene, including Hands of God divinely intervening. Other pivotal moments in the life of Moses are represented, so while there is a continuous Moses narrative in the Dura frescoes, we find no trace of tefillin at all. One suspects that exegetical link had not really yet been made.

Some—not all—figures at Dura wear tzitzit, but none wear tefillin. Perhaps people were not generally wearing tefillin. Perhaps the artists did not consider tefillin a detail worth rendering—or if they were worn, perhaps they were worn very discreetly. Later Jewish art of the period does not generally bother representing tzitzit either, and Christian art never at all, according to Revel-Naher; again, an artistic convention, or one representing a reality? and if so, a reality of discretion or of non-observance?²⁸

The first images we have of tefillin are from Byzantium, where they are one of the ways iconography represents Jewish figures. The tefillin in these sources have evolved from the flattish pouches of the Judean Desert to cuboids, a development which raises more questions than it answers.

Importantly, Revel-Naher points out that not *all* Jews wear tefillin. Ezra, when working on the holy codices, wears tefillin. The High Priest does. Moses does. Tefillin seem, in this genre, to be

²⁷ Goodenough, E. R. and J. Neusner (1988). Jewish symbols in the Greco-Roman period. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

²⁸ Revel-Neher, E. and Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism (Universitah ha-‘Ivrit bi-Yerushalayim) (1992). The image of the Jew in Byzantine art. Oxford ; New York, Published for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Hebrew University of Jerusalem by Pergamon Press. Also Bonfil, R. (2012). Jews in Byzantium : dialectics of minority and majority cultures. Leiden ; Boston, Brill.

a way of identifying particularly holy Jewish figures. Revel-Naher suggests this reflects a Jewish reality in which tefillin were the province of only the holiest Jews: "In the street, out of fear...the rabbis advised people to desist from wearing them in public, while some scholars and outstanding leaders still retained the practice." Whether this is the case or not, the Byzantine images don't appear to be showing the daily practice of the Jew-in-the-street, as Cohn's tefillin, or the constant, universal aide-memoire of Aristeas and Philo.

Aggadic Midrashim

The aggadic midrashim are notoriously difficult to date, and as such provide quite a convenient bridging-point between antiquity and the Middle Ages. The Deuteronomy parallels to our verse get some coverage in the early aggadic midrashim, but the Exodus verses don't seem to feature much. As with other rabbinic literature, this is not to say that tefillin and the exodus from Egypt do not feature in the aggadic midrashim, but specific references to our verses are more common in the medieval compilations.

This midrash, found in the Vilna edition of Shemot Rabba (i.e. part of the Tanchuma literature) connects tefillin-observance back to the exodus from Egypt, and more specifically, to the verse's broader scriptural context. This is the first source we have seen which troubles itself to ask just *why* the mitzvah of tefillin should be found in a section about sanctifying the firstborn. We translate:

Sanctify unto Me each firstborn. Rabbi Nechemia said, The Holy One said to Israel: When you come into the land, hand every firstborn over to me. One might think that one didn't have to do it immediately, but Scripture says *Thou shalt hand over every firstborn to God*—this means immediately. Concerning the time he had mercy on them in Egypt, God informed the Israelites *It shall be when your child asks you tomorrow* that you inform him of the miracles that were done for you in Egypt when Pharaoh was refusing to

let you go; as it is written *And it was when Pharoah was refusing*: make it a sign on your hand and on your head, as it is written *And it shall be a sign upon your hand*. A parable: There was a king who made a great feast for his daughter, who had been captive amongst enemies. Her father said to her, "Take this feast and make it a crown for your head, so that you won't forget it." Thus Elohim made miracles for Israel, and because of them he killed the firstborns of Egypt, and accordingly he informed them of the sanctity of the firstborns, that he had killed them himself, as it is said, *And God smote every firstborn*—that it would be a crown on the heads of Israel, so that they would not forget the miracle.

Midrash Tehillim, on Psalm 1, examines the verse *His delight is in the Torah of God*. Here, Israel say to God,

"Master of the Universe! We want to be engaged with the Torah day and night, but we don't have time!" The Holy One replied "Observe the mitzvah of tefillin, and I will count it as if you are engaged with the Torah day and night." Rabbi Yochanan said, Scripture says this explicitly: *And it shall be for you a sign on your hand, and a reminder between your eyes, in order that the Torah of God shall be in your mouth*. (The midrash goes on to point out that tefillin are not, in fact, worn at night, and to suggest Shema recitation as an acceptable night-time substitute, and continues with an examination of legitimate ways of spending one's time other than Torah study, but this is not our immediate concern.)

Pause

We pause here, to return with medieval midrashim and their relationship to the masoretic text (and lack thereof) in part II. The early aggadic midrashim leave us with the certain and comfortable impression that our verse is understood to have a concrete literal foundation, in the form of the tefillin-ritual. The details of the ritual are decently divided between having been given at Sinai and having been prescribed obliquely by the verses, and the function of the ritual is exactly as the verse indicates: to crown Israel with a symbol of the Exodus miracle, and to serve as a placeholder for the more in-depth awareness which eludes those who have not resources to study as much as they might wish; a category into which we must surely place ourselves.

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