

RAB ṬABBĀḤĪM AND ŚAR HAṬṬABBĀḤĪM: COMMANDERS OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD?

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The meaning of *ṭbh*

The verb *ṭbh* in Biblical Hebrew means “slaughter.” It is used both in the context of the preparation of food, e.g., Gen 43.16; 1 Sam 25.11; Prov 9.2, and metaphorically meaning to kill people, e.g., Ps 37.14. Cognates in other Semitic languages equally mean “slaughter” or “cook.”¹ The noun *ṭabbāḥ*, denoting the function of butcher or cook, occurs in 1 Sam 9.23-24: “And Samuel said to the cook [*haṭṭabbāḥ*], ‘Bring the portion I gave you, the one I asked you to put aside.’ The cook took up the thigh and what went with it and set them before Saul.” The feminine plural occurs in 1 Sam 8.13, “He [i.e., the king] will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks [*ṭabbāḥōt*] and bakers.” Other words from the root *ṭbh* similarly have to do with slaughtering and cooking, both in Biblical Hebrew and in its cognates.

There seems to be one exception to this. A particular function, based on the same root *ṭbh*, seems to be that of head of the *ṭabbāḥīm*. In the Old Testament, this function is found in three forms:

1. *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm* in Gen 37.36; 39.1; 40.3-4; 41.10-12
2. *rab ṭabbāḥīm* in 2 Kgs 25.8-20; Jer 39.9-13; 40.1; 41.10; 43.6; 52.12-30
3. *rab ṭabbāḥayyā* in Dan 2.14 (Aramaic).

The three forms denote the same function. In all cases it is the chief (*śar*, *rab*) of the *ṭabbāḥīm*. The expected meaning would be “chief of the cooks” or simply “chef.” However, according to the dictionaries, the meaning of this term is “chief of the (royal) bodyguards.” This is adopted in the Bible translations. Where does this supposed meaning come from?

Chief of the royal bodyguards

The dictionaries of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic² support the meaning “chief of the (royal) bodyguards.”

1 Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, eds., *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (trans. W. G. E. Watson; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 887; Jacob Hofstijzer and Karel Jongeling, eds., *Dictionary of the North-west Semitic Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 419.

2 See the end of this article for full bibliographic information on the dictionaries cited.

Gesenius¹⁷ supports the suggested meaning “chief of the royal bodyguards” with the consideration “weil diese d. Tiere schlachtete,” with reference to Robertson Smith.³

BDB likewise understands the “royal bodyguard” as being derived from the “royal slaughterers” by referring to Robertson Smith.⁴ However, the works by Robertson Smith do not provide any arguments for this understanding of the title. Instead, Robertson Smith takes this supposed meaning for granted and suggests on the basis of this assumption that the royal bodyguards were also responsible for the slaughtering of animals for temple sacrifices. The question remains as to why this title is to be understood as “chief of the royal bodyguard” in the first place.

ThWAT (3:302-6) similarly proposes the meaning “chief of the royal bodyguard.” While acknowledging that this is somewhat unexpected given the semantic field of *ṭbh* in Biblical Hebrew, it is suggested that perhaps the royal bodyguard also functioned as slaughterers, butchers, and perhaps as executioners (i.e., slaughterers in a metaphorical sense). For support, reference is made to various commentaries, especially on Genesis.⁵

HALOT follows this line of thought. The entry in *HALOT* vol. 2 for *ṭabbāḥ* pl. “bodyguards,” “executioners,” refers to the commentary on Kings by Montgomery and Snyder Gehman,⁶ and the entry in vol. 5 (Aramaic) for *ṭabbāḥ* pl. “executioners,” “bodyguards,” refers to the commentary on Daniel by Montgomery.⁷ Commenting on Dan 2.14, Montgomery suggests the term means “chief of the executioners.” These functionaries, in his view, were responsible for carrying out death sentences and were therefore called “the butchers.” This suggestion is however not further substantiated.⁸ *HALOT* vol. 5 (Aramaic) for the meaning of *rab ṭabbāḥayyā* in Dan 2.14 also refers to Josephus, *Ant.* 10.197. This is an interesting reference:

3 W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. First Series. The Fundamental Institutions* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1889), 396, with note 2.

4 W. Robertson Smith, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church. Twelve Lectures on Biblical Criticism* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1881), 426, note 4.

5 Hermann Gunkel suggests that this function shows that “the royal bodyguard” also slaughtered animals and executed criminals (*Genesis* [3d rev. ed.; Handkommentar zum Alten Testament I:1/3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910], 410). Similar suggestions, equally without further substantiation, can be found in the commentaries on Genesis by John Skinner (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* [2d ed.; International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930], 457) and by Otto Procksch (*Die Genesis* [Kommentar zum Alten Testament 1; Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1913], 383).

6 James A. Montgomery and Henry Snyder Gehman, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1951), 562, 568.

7 James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1927), 154-55.

8 The meaning of the Akkadian *ṭabāḥu* is not of much help. The verb *ṭabāḥu* means “slaughter, butcher, slit the throat,” i.e., of animals, or applied to armies. The noun *ṭābiḥu* means “slaughterer, butcher,” a profession often associated with a temple and mentioned among other temple-paid professions, such as brewers and cooks. Furthermore, *ṭābiḥu* is used as a divine epithet, “the butcher” (*CAD*, vol. 19, under *ṭābiḥu*). Finally, the term is perhaps also used a few times as the title of a courtier, although this is debated (John A. Brinkman, “Ur: 721-605 B.C.,” *Orientalia* 34 [1965]: 241-58 [249, note 1]; M. W. Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire. The Murašû Archive, the Murašû Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia* [Leiden: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1985], 55, note 12). The precise function of this supposed courtier has not been determined as yet, but no connection with executions is at hand.

Josephus describes Arioch, the *rab ṭabbāḥayyā*, as the one “to whom was entrusted the command of the king’s bodyguard.”⁹ Is this, finally, the substantiation of the common rendering “chief of the royal bodyguard”? I will demonstrate below that this is not the case. Josephus’s version of Dan 2 (*Ant.* 10.195-210) is not a real translation, and the depiction of Arioch does not offer a title but rather a functional and contextually inspired description. This will be elaborated in the section on Dan 2.14.

Gesenius¹⁸ stays with the traditional meaning (“Leibwächter des Königs”) but refers to new studies by Brinkman¹⁰ and Vergote.¹¹ Vergote claims correspondence between *śar haṭṭabbāhīm* (Gen 37, 39, 40, 41) and an Egyptian title, but this has been refuted by Redford.¹² Most interesting, however, is the study by Brinkman, for he argues the exact opposite of what he is cited for: “note, however, that the common translation “(body)guard” is not borne out by the textual evidence in the Bible, but rests on Josephus’s equivalent *sōmatophulakes*.”¹³

DCH vol. 3, *ṭabbāḥ* “butcher, cook,” gives a threefold distinction: 1. cook, in 1 Sam 9.23-24; 2. domestic servant in *śar haṭṭabbāhīm* “prince of the domestic servants,” i.e., chief steward, in Gen 37.36; 39.1; 40.3-4; 41.10-12; and 3. (body)guard, *rab ṭabbāhīm*, captain of (the body)guard(s), as the title of Nebuzaradan, head of the Babylonian forces who captured Jerusalem, in 2 Kgs 25.8-20; Jer 39.9-13; 40.1; 41.10; 43.6; 52.12-30. The distinction between meanings 2. and 3., that is, between *śar haṭṭabbāhīm* as “chief steward” and *rab ṭabbāhīm* as “captain of the bodyguard,” is remarkable (this will be dealt with below). Even more remarkable in this respect is the fact that it is stated in the “Addenda and Corrigenda” to *DCH*, published on the internet, that the third meaning, “(body)guard” must be deleted and that all references under it must be transferred to meaning 1. cook.¹⁴ With this I fully agree, as further discussion will show.

Nabû-zeru-idinna, *rab nuḥatimmi* (chief cook)

The function under discussion is not chief of the royal bodyguard, but chief cook. This is the meaning of the Hebrew, and this meaning is unambiguously supported by a Babylonian royal inscription.

In the Hebrew Bible, the figure most frequently referred to as “chief of the *ṭabbāhīm*” is Nebuzaradan. He is a high functionary of King Nebuchadnezzar

9 Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities. Books IX-XI* (Trans. Ralph Marcus; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937, repr. 2001), 268-69.

10 Brinkman, “Ur,” 249, note 1.

11 Jozef Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte: Genèse, chap. 37-50 à la lumière des études égyptologiques récentes* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1959), 31-35.

12 Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37–50)* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 20; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 20 and 192, note 3. See further the discussion in the section on Genesis, below.

13 Brinkman, “Ur,” 249, note 1.

14 D. J. A. Clines, “Dictionary of Classical Hebrew. Addenda and Corrigenda,” version 1, December 2002, p. 16: “III, p. 340a s.v. *ṭabbach* butcher, cook, delete 3. bodyguard and the paragraph it begins. All the references in the paragraph should be transferred to 1. cook, since they relate to Nebuzaradan, chief cook of Nebuchadnezzar.” Citation from <http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/DCHAddCorr1.pdf>, posted on 17 December 2002 by Clines.

of Babylonia. He is mentioned, with his function, in 2 Kgs 25 and in Jer 39, 40, 41, 43, and 52. Significantly, this same royal functionary is mentioned in a royal inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II. He figures on a list of high royal functionaries.¹⁵ In the inscription he appears as Nabû-zeru-idinna, *rab nuḫatimmi*. The Akkadian term *rab nuḫatimmi* literally means “chief cook” or “head of the kitchen.” This title, which occurs more often in Akkadian texts, can be interpreted as referring to a high royal functionary.¹⁶

The title of chief cook does not mean that this man cooked the king’s meals. It rather denotes a high royal functionary, someone trusted by the king, who could, as we see from the biblical texts, be entrusted with an important responsibility. The title may be compared with the title *rab šāqê*. The latter literally means “chief cup-bearer,” but it clearly denotes a high royal functionary who could be sent on a specific diplomatic or military mission (e.g., 2 Kgs 18–19). Designations such as “chief cook” and “chief cup-bearer” are thus to some extent honorary titles that denote high royal functionaries.

Nebuchadnezzar’s *rab nuḫatimmi* (“chief cook”) appears in the Hebrew Bible with the title *rab ṭabbāḥîm*. The Hebrew, or at least the second part of it, is a loan translation, a calque.¹⁷ In this respect it differs from titles such as *rab šāqê* and *rab sārîs* (e.g., 2 Kings 18.17) which were directly taken over from Assyrian. The title *rab nuḫatimmi* / *rab ṭabbāḥîm* is neatly rendered in the Septuagint (LXX) as *archimageiros* “chief cook.” In Akkadian, in Hebrew, and in Greek, the official bears the title of chief cook, which is to be interpreted as a (honorary) title denoting a high royal officer.

Nebuzaradan, the chief cook mentioned in 2 Kgs 25 and in various chapters of the book of Jeremiah, was a high officer of the Babylonian king, charged by his lord Nebuchadnezzar with a special task. He supervised the completion of the Babylonian dealings with Jerusalem (in 586 B.C.E.). The nature of his mission implies that he was a high royal functionary, trusted by the king to act as his deputy.¹⁸

Arioch, the beginning of the misunderstanding?

In Dan 2, Arioch is mentioned in 2.14-15 and 2.24-25. He is a royal official under Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel 2 is the only text where he is mentioned. His function is mentioned once, in Dan 2.14, where he is called *rab ṭabbāḥayyâ*. This is the Aramaic equivalent of Hebrew *rab ṭabbāḥîm*. It seems likely that this Arioch has been

15 The inscription was published as “Der Hofstaat Nebukadnezars II” by Eckhard Unger in 1931 (*Babylon. Die heilige Stadt nach der Beschreibung der Babylonier* [Berlin: De Gruyter]). For a recent edition, see Paul-Richard Berger, *Die neubabylonischen Königsinschriften* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament 4/1; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1973), 313.

16 CAD, under *nuḫatimmu*.

17 This is argued by Unger, *Babylon*, 289, note 2; and further by David S. Vanderhooft, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 150; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 11; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988), 318-19; and E. Lipinski, Review of A. Lacocque, *Le livre de Daniel* (*Vetus Testamentum* 28 [1978]: 233-241), 235-36.

18 Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 318-19.

modelled on Nebuzaradan, the *rab ṭabbāhīm* appearing in 2 Kgs 25 and in several chapters of Jeremiah. The dependence of the book of Daniel on earlier biblical traditions, among which certainly is the book of Jeremiah, is broadly accepted. In any case, Arioch is introduced in Dan 2 as a high royal officer of Nebuchadnezzar, just as Nebuzaradan figures in 2 Kgs 25 and the book of Jeremiah.

Daniel 2 provides no indications that the title *rab ṭabbāhīyā* is here to be understood as “chief of the royal bodyguard.” As the Aramaic equivalent of Hebrew *rab ṭabbāhīm* it is a loan translation of Akkadian *rab nuḥatimmi*. Whether or not the author of Dan 2 was aware of this origin of the title, he probably used it with the appropriate meaning, referring to a high royal officer, i.e., a functionary of the king who could be charged with a specific task of great importance. Like 2 Kgs 25 and the book of Jeremiah, the early Greek translations (LXX, Theodotion) provide an exact translation, *archimageiros*. This suggests that also in Dan 2.14 the title originally meant “chief cook” and denoted a high royal functionary.¹⁹

Later translations, however, have changed the function of Arioch in Dan 2.14. Already mentioned is the rendering by Flavius Josephus, in his *Jewish Antiquities*. He describes Arioch as *tō tēn epi tōn sōmatophulakōn tou basileōs archēn pepisteumenō* “to whom was entrusted the command of the king’s bodyguard” (*Ant.* 10.197). This is not a translation of the title used in Dan 2.14, but his own description. Josephus’s version of Dan 2 (*Ant.* 10.195-212) is his own account and not a translation,²⁰ and the depiction of Arioch as the one “to whom was entrusted the command of the king’s bodyguard,” is a functional description based on Josephus’s interpretation of this story. The translation of Aquila renders Arioch’s title as *didaskalos sphaktōn* (var. *sphazontōn*) “head of the killers.”²¹ The Vulgate renders it as *princeps militiae regis* “head of the king’s soldiers.” It seems to me that the Vulgate in particular has contributed to the common translation of “chief of the royal bodyguard.”²²

Genesis, the occurrence of a real chief cook?

In Genesis the situation is slightly different. First of all, the title is used here in the form of *śar haṭtabbāhīm* (Gen 37.36; 39.1; 40.3-4; 41.10-12). As we saw above, *DCH* proposes a different meaning for these instances in Genesis: “‘prince of the domestic servants,’ i.e., chief steward.” Why would there be a difference between *śar haṭtabbāhīm* as “chief steward” and *rab ṭabbāhīm* as “chief of the royal bodyguard”? Probably, the editors of *DCH* saw that there was no good reason for taking the function in Genesis to mean “head of the royal bodyguard.” Therefore, they suggested a meaning seemingly appropriate for the context of Genesis.

¹⁹ See particularly Lipinski, Review, 235-36.

²⁰ Geza Vermes, “Josephus’ Treatment of the Book of Daniel,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991): 149-66 (161).

²¹ Daniel 2.14: *tō archimageirō*; Aquila: *didaskalos sphazontōn / sphaktōn*; Syrohexapla (cf. Dan 1.3): “the head of the killers/executioners”; see *Septuaginta. Band 16,2. Susanna. Daniel. Bel et Draco* (ed. J. Ziegler, O. Munnich, and D. Fraenkel; 2d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

²² Elsewhere, the Vulgate renders this title as *magister militiae* (Gen 37.36), *princeps exercitus* (Gen 39.1), *princeps militum* (40.3; 41.10), *princeps militiae* (Jer 39.13; 52.12).

However, the situation has altered. The correction in *DCH* makes clear that *rab ṭabbāḥīm* does not mean “chief of the royal bodyguards,” but “chief cook.” This is supported by the discussion presented here. After this correction, however, there is no reason any more for distinguishing between *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm* and *rab ṭabbāḥīm*. In all instances, the title means “chief cook” and denotes a high royal functionary.

Attempts to relate *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm* to an Egyptian title have been criticized by Redford, who rightly pointed out that *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm* is “pure Hebrew” (even more so than *rab ṭabbāḥīm*).²³

In the context of the Joseph narrative in Genesis, one other aspect merits some attention. Many commentators have argued that the Joseph narrative is the result of a literary development. The story on the whole is not of a piece, but the end result of a process of literary growth. One of the proposals is to distinguish between two “narrative lines.” In the first story line, the Midianites take Joseph to Egypt where they sell him to the *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm*. Joseph stays in the house of the *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm* as a slave. When two functionaries of Pharaoh, the chief of the butlers and the chief of the bakers, are confined in the house of the *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm*, Joseph is appointed by his master as a personal servant to these two prominent prisoners. This story line presents Joseph as *not* being in prison, but as a slave bought by the *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm*, and as serving the two prominent prisoners in his house.

In the second story line, which in the present text of Genesis has become interwoven with the first, Joseph is sold by the Ishmaelites to a “servant of Pharaoh,” Potiphar, and stays in his house. Some commentators regard the first story line as the “basic story” of Joseph in Egypt. In that case, the second story line of Joseph in the house of Potiphar is seen as a later expansion on the basic story.²⁴ Other commentators identify the two lines as stemming from two different sources that have become interwoven.²⁵ In both cases, scholars suggest that the *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm* originally belongs to a story in which Joseph was sold as a slave to the *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm* and served in his house, where one day two prominent Egyptians were confined. At that point Joseph’s rise to importance in Egypt begins. Genesis 40 still presents Joseph as staying in the house of the *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm*, and serving two prominent figures, the chief of the butlers and chief of the bakers, who were confined there. In Gen 41.12 Joseph is referred to as “a servant of the *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm*.”

In the developed version of the story, Joseph stayed in the house of Potiphar first (Gen 39). This episode ended with Joseph being falsely accused and imprisoned. As a result, in the developed narrative the house of the *śar haṭṭabbāḥīm* became a prison.

23 Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story*, 56, 192.

24 Redford, *Study of the Biblical Story*, 146-47, and see 183-84 for an outline of his analysis.

25 Ludwig Schmidt, *Literarische Studien zur Josephgeschichte* (Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft—Beiheft 167; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986), 218-47, and see 281 for an outline of his analysis. He regards the first story line as part of the E-source and the second as part of the J-source.

If the “original” story line depicts Joseph as a slave in the house of the *śar haṭṭabbāĥīm*, the picture changes. The chief of the butlers and chief of the bakers were not thrown into fetters, but were confined in the house of the *śar haṭṭabbāĥīm* until Pharaoh would decide what to do with them. They were evidently treated well, for the *śar haṭṭabbāĥīm* installed Joseph as their personal servant. It seems to me that in this story the title *śar haṭṭabbāĥīm* for once functions quite literally. When Pharaoh was angry with two high functionaries of the royal kitchen, the “chief cook” confined them in his house until Pharaoh could decide what to do with them. This story is the only instance where we find the form *śar haṭṭabbāĥīm* in the Hebrew Bible. It functions, furthermore, in a context in which two other titles, *śar hammašqīm*, chief of the butlers, and *śar hā’ōphīm*, chief of the bakers, similarly are to be taken literally (cf. the dreams in Gen 40). All this suggests that in the original version of the story of Gen 40–41, the *śar haṭṭabbāĥīm* literally functioned as the chief cook, or perhaps as the overseer of the royal kitchen.²⁶

Suggestion for translation

The conclusion may be drawn that the common translation “chief of the royal bodyguard” cannot be supported by good arguments and should therefore be abandoned. The title as it appears in the Hebrew Bible is equivalent to (Babylonian) *rab nuḥatimmi* and (Greek) *archimageiros*. Its literal meaning is “chief cook” and it denotes a high royal functionary. The title can be compared to the title *rab šāqē*, literally “chief cup-bearer,” but equally denoting a high royal officer. In the cases of 2 Kgs 25, the book of Jeremiah, and Dan 2.14, the title is perhaps best rendered as “a high (royal) functionary.” In the case of Gen 40–41 one may suspect that, originally, the title was used literally to refer to the chief cook or head of the royal kitchen. However, in the final text of Genesis (with expansions of this title in 37.36 and 39.1 and the house of the *śar haṭṭabbāĥīm* as a prison) the best solution is to render the title similarly to the other cases, as a “high (royal) functionary.”

Dictionaries referred to by abbreviation:

BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907, reprinted with corrections 1966.
CAD	Gelb, I. J., et al., eds. <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . 21 vols. Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956–.
DCH	Clines, David J. A. <i>The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . 7 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–.
Gesenius ¹⁷	Buhl, Frants, et al., eds. <i>Wilhelm Gesenius’ hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament</i> . 17th ed. Berlin: Springer, 1962. Reprinted from the 1915 edition.

²⁶ The LXX renders this title in Genesis mostly as *archimageiros*, but sometimes as “chief jailor,” which is a logical outcome of the conjunction of the two story lines.

- Gesenius¹⁸ Meyer, Rudolph, and Herber Donner, eds. *Wilhelm Gesenius hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*. 18th ed. 6 vols. Heidelberg: Springer, 1987–.
- HALOT Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill 1994–1999.
- ThWAT Botterweck, G. Johannes, and Helmer Ringgren, eds. *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*. 10 vols. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer: 1970–2000. V. Hamp. *tabach*. Pages 302-6 in vol. 3 (1982).



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