

**THE PHILISTINE DEITY *DAGON*:
THE SEMITIC ORIGIN AND TWO POSSIBLE DERIVATIONS**

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John Milton refers to Dagon [dā gon], the deity of the Philistines, as a "Sea Monster, upward Man and downward Fish" (*PL*, I : 462—3), and as a "sea-idol" (*SA*, 13). In this context, the name is possibly derived from the Hebrew word *dag*, meaning fish. The cult of that god, as Judg. 16 : 23 and I Sam. 5 : 1—2 indicate, centered in the Philistine cities of Gaza and Ashdod. His worship at Gaza in particular was continued to a late period. During the Maccabean Wars, Jonathan, the brother of Judas Maccabeus, destroyed the temple of Dagon at Gaza in 147 B.C. (I Macc. 10 : 83—84).

However, the name Dagon was associated with the Semitic common noun for corn, *dāḡān*, and thus he seemed to have been an agricultural deity. In this agricultural sense, the name still survives in the modern colloquial Arabic spoken in parts of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The following two words seem to have been derived from *dagan*:

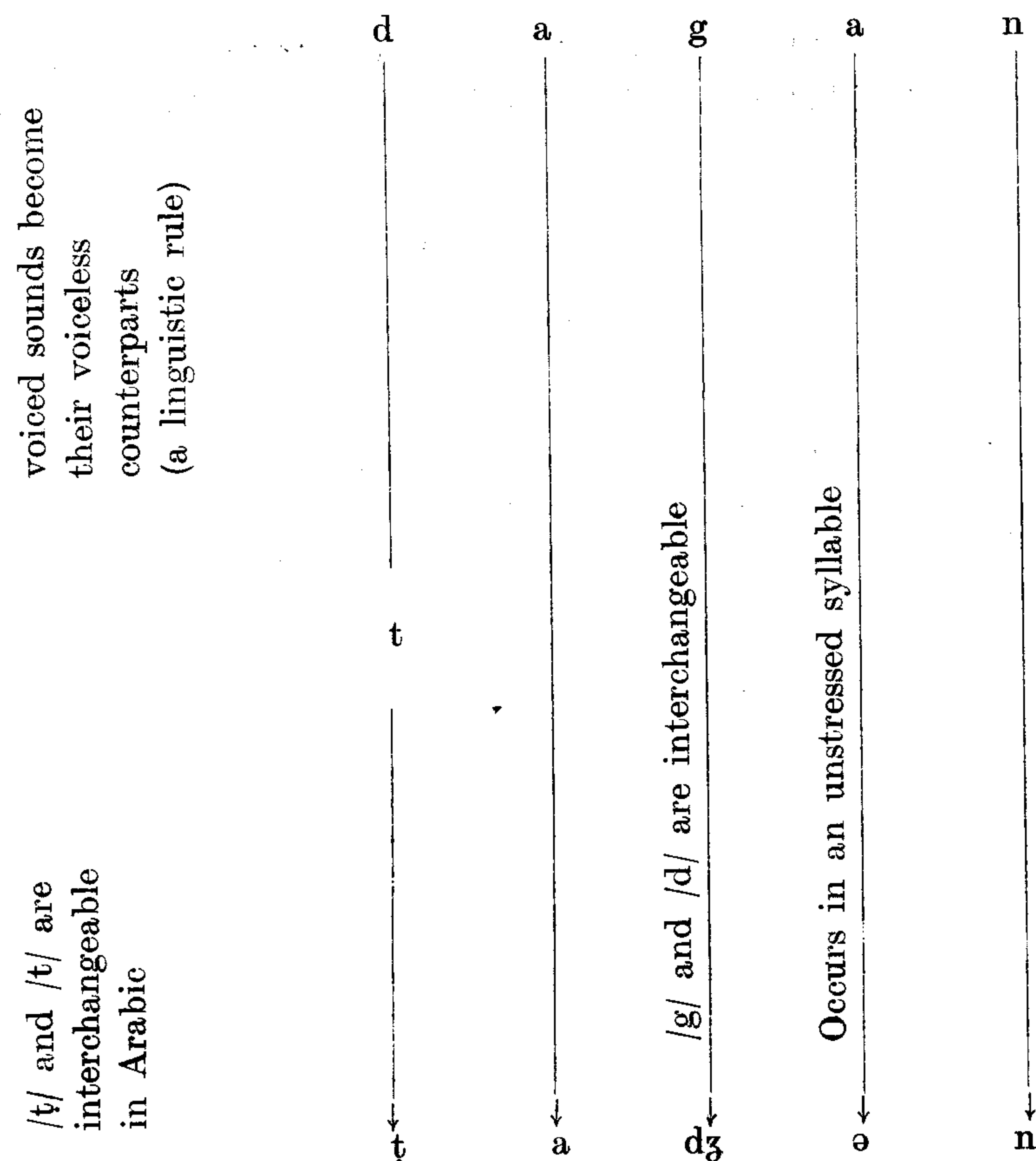
1. *tājin* [tādʒən]
2. *tājūn*. [tā dʒūn]
1. *tājin* [tādʒən]

This word refers to a cooking pot. The linguistic relation it bears to *dagan* may be illustrated as follows:

The voiced /d/ in *dagan* becomes voiceless /t/ in *tājin*. This is in keeping with the rules of language change, according to which voiced sounds become their voiceless counterparts (Hyman 1975 : 17—18). Arabic /t/ is no more

¹ In Ugaritic, the name *dgn* alludes to his origin as a god of grain. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1971 edition.

than an emphatic /t/ — the voiceless counterpart of /d/. It should be stated here that Arabic emphatic and non-emphatic sounds are interchangeable, and that they automatically pass into each other (Jakobson 1971 : 510—22). /g/ and /d/ are also interchangeable in Arabic. The difference between the two sounds is only a matter of dialectal variation traceable to the early stages of the development of Arabic (Anees 1963 : 188). The final /a/ in *dagan* becomes /ə/ in [tādʒən] because it occurs in an unstressed syllable.



2. *tājūn* [tā dʒūn]

This word means a big eater or a glutton. Its use is restricted to the Arabic dialect spoken in southern Jordan. The linguistic change already explained in relation to [tādʒən] applies to [tā dʒūn] with the sole exception of the existence of /ū/. The long close back vowel /ū/ makes *tajun* either a) an extension of the intensive adjective of classical Arabic form $c_1\bar{a}c_2\bar{u}c_3^2$, by lengthen-

² c_1 = first root radical
 c_2 = second root radical
 c_3 = third root radical.

ing the first vowel, or b) a lexicalization of the famous Syriac form $c_1\bar{a}c_2\bar{u}c_3$, denoting instrument or tool, which assumes the role of an adjective expressing intensity. Thus *tājūn* means one who eats too much and finishes up what he has on his plate; and, thus, because he eats too much, he resembles an "eating instrument."³

Being associated with food, the two words echo the Semitic *dagan*. Moreover, they are used in regions adjacent to Gaza and Ashdod. Historically speaking, Philistia was "an area of importance from early times, since one of the most convenient routes between Egypt and Syria passed through it" (Mitchell 1967 : 405). There were contacts between the Philistines and the Egyptians as early as the end of the fourth millennium. In southern Jordan, the kingdoms of Edom and Moab flourished during the period between the thirteenth and the sixth centuries B. C. Gradually, "the Edomites shifted across the Arabah into the region at the northern fringe of the Negev [southern Palestine] and into southern Judah" (Schoville 1978 : 785). They thus came into close geographical contact with Philistia. By the fourth century B. C., the former Edomite territory in southern Jordan had been inhabited by a semi nomadic Arab people known as the Nabateans. The Nabateans, the eminent archaeologist Nelson Glueck stated, were "one of the most remarkable people that ever crossed the stages of history" (Evenari and Koller 1956: 40). Having Petra as their capital, they virtually dominated the trade of the ancient world from the fourth century B. C. to 106 A. D. Their trade routes went as far north as Damascus, as far west as Egypt, and as far east as Persia (Lawlor 1974: 68). They even "shipped goods to Greece and Italy via Gaza and Alexandria" (Glueck 1970: 192). Nabatean cities, villages, temples, and fortresses were found "throughout the Negev [very close to Gaza], beginning south of Beersheba (Wirght 1974: 229). More than five hundred "distinctively Nabatean sites" were discovered in eastern and western Palestine (Morris 1961: 57). The Nabateans are mentioned in the Old Testament. In the Book of Maccabees, they are referred to twice as the "Nabateans" (I Macc. 5 : 25; 9 : 35), and once as the "Arabians" (II Macc. 5 : 8). There is no question about the identity of the "Arabians" with the Nabateans in the latter reference because Aretas, the celebrated king of the Nabateans, is named as the king of the "Arabians," (II Cor., 11 : 32). Indeed, "when we think of Palestine about two thousands years ago, we often overlook the fact that the Nabateans were very much a part of its general cultural world" (Glueck 1959 : 191). In 105—6 A. D., the Roman emperor, Trajan, put an end to the independence of the Nabateans and made Petra a Roman province called Arabia Petraea. They became Roman subjects, but continued their activity as before. In the

³ A distinguishing element of Semitic languages is the transference of names of gods, deities, and other proper nouns to common nouns. Thus the word Baal, god of rain, becomes a husband in Arabic. It also means land irrigated by rain water.

fourth century A. D., they intermingled with Arab tribes emigrating to Jordan and Syria from the Arabian Peninsula. One of those tribes was Judham which inhabited the same area as the Nabateans (southern Jordan). Judham engaged in trade with Egypt, Palestine and Syria, thus continuing the Nabatean practice. Along with Judham, the Nabateans participated in the early Islamic conquests. In the Omayyad period (661—750 A. D.), most of them became farmers and villagers, and ultimately intermingled with other Arab tribes in the region (Hitti 1965: 7—10). As early as the tenth century, the word *tājīn* is listed in Arabic dictionaries as a word of “non-Arabic origin which had undergone an Arabization process to mean a saucepan”⁴ (Shakir 1944).

Thanks to the Nabateans' commercial activities, the southern part of Jordan had an almost unbroken contact with Palestine (particularly the Gaza area), Egypt and Syria. On the basis of those close commercial and cultural ties, and on the basis of linguistic similarities described above, the two words *tājīn* and *tāj ūn* are most probably related to the Semitic word *dagan*. Arabic dialects, “being the most important living Semitic idiom,” had apparently preserved important linguistic features of proto-Semitic, and hence, “an investigation into the nature of the Arabic dialects may be of great significance for fuller understanding of the Old Semitic Languages” (Blau 1969: 38).

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⁴ Ibn Mandūr (1232—1310 A. C.) lists the word in his famous *Lisan al-Arab* [The Arab Tongue], vol. 17, and defines it as non-Arabic in origin, meaning a saucepan.