

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

PHARAOH - LORD OF THE STAKES OR PYRAMIDS?

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Here is a popular rendering of a verse in which Pharaoh is referred to as the 'Lord of the stakes'

038.012

"Before them (were many who) rejected messengers,- the people of Noah, and 'Ad, and **Pharaoh**,
the Lord of **Stakes** (Arabic: **Awtad**)"

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَعَادٌ وَفِرْعَوْنُ ذُو الْأَوْتَادِ

Awtad

[Illustration - Joseph Islam](#)

Many commentators have different renderings of the word 'Awtad' which include, stakes, tent-pegs, spikes etc.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali
'Pharaoh, the Lord of Stakes'

Marmaduke Pickhtall
'Pharaoh firmly planted'

M.H. Shakir
'Firon, the lord of spikes'

George Sale
'Pharaoh the contriver of stakes'

Arthur John Arberry
'Pharaoh, he of the tent-pegs'

Zaheen Fatima Baig
'Fir'aun, owner of the stakes'

SO WHAT DID THE ARABIC WORD 'AWTAD' MEAN TO THE CLASSICAL ARABS?

'Awtad' comes from the Arabic Root: 'WAW-TA-DAL' which does indeed mean: Stakes, Pegs, Tent Poles or to drive in a stake as a literal understanding.

(TA ;) *He knocked with a mallet, (Mgh,) and fixed, or made firm or fast, a wooden pin, peg, or stake, (Ṣ, * M, A, * L, Mṣb, Ḳ,) in the ground or in a wall. (Mṣb.) — وَتَدَّ, (M, L, Ḳ,) [aor. وَتَدُّ,] inf. n. وَتَدٌ and تَدَةٌ ; (M, L ;) and † وَتَدٌ ; (M, L, Ḳ ;) It (a wooden pin, peg, or stake,) was, or became, fixed, firm, or fast. (M, L, Ḳ.)*

[Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon](#) [1]

† وَتَيْدٌ, (L, art. وود,) A wooden pin, peg, or stake, which is fixed in the ground or in a wall : (M, L, Ḳ ;) pl. أَوْتَادٌ (Ṣ, M, L, Ḳ.) [You say,]

[Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon](#) [2]

TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING

According to many classical Quranic commentators and scholars such as Al-Zamakshari (d. circa 12th century), the ancient Bedouin Arab term refers to a majestic powerful dominion or an establishment steeped in both might and power. Many modern commentators advance the same thoughts to explain this term as a reference to Pharaoh denoting his established might, stability and his personal arrogance. It is also further suggested that 'a person of many tent-poles' can be an allusion to a mighty ruler or chieftain. Further theories are also advanced to suggest that the 'many stakes' is a reference to the large number of armies or even a reference to the dire punishment of impaling people with stakes by Pharaoh.

SOME DIFFICULTIES WITH THE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING

These above renderings are difficult to reconcile with the Quran's own context where for example in Surah Fajr (89), three mighty entities are discussed along with their symbols of power and in sequence with a reference to them all transgressing in the lands. They were all firmly established and were all guilty of transgression and arrogance. As a reference to their power, man-made constructs are mentioned explicitly as an indication of their power in the land. In the case of Ad, Iram with its lofty pillars or towers (89:7), nothing like it was ever created by humans before, a possible allusion as a physical sign of their power (89:8); the Thamud who cleaved dwellings from the rocks in the valley, a possible reference to the Nabatean legacy (89:9) and Pharaoh, Lord of the 'Awtad' all having transgressed limits (89:11).

In keeping with the theme, it is difficult to exclusively refer to 'Awtad' as established power in reference to Pharaoh, as both Ad and Thamud also enjoyed extreme might and were also powerfully established. Keeping with the reference to the man-made physical constructions of Iram (Ad) and the Rock dwellings of Thamud, Lord of the 'stakes' also seems to suggest a reference to a physical construction which exemplified Pharaoh's might.

089.007-8

"Of the (city of) Iram, with lofty pillars" The like of which were not produced in (all) the land"

089.009

"And with the Thamud (people), who cut out (huge) rocks in the valley?"

089.010

"And with Pharaoh, lord of the Awtad"

089.011

"(All) these transgressed beyond bounds in the lands"

AN ALTERNATIVE RENDERING FROM A QURANIC PERSPECTIVE

The word 'Awtad' to describe mountains.

In verse 78:7, the mountains are described as '**Awtad**'. Many traditional commentators connect this to verse 16:15 where the stabilising nature of the mountain is referred to. However, the 'Awtad' in 78:7 to describe mountains could also be a specific reference to the projection from the earth in the shape of 'tent pegs'. This certainly seems to be the case if 78:7 is read in context with the previous verse where the Earth is referred to as being spread out or a wide expanse and the mountains as 'Awtad' (i.e. a projection).

Certainly the Quran's primary audience were the Bedouins and any reference to mountains serving as pegs into the ground stabilising the Earth is far fetched as this would not have been visible to the Pagan Arabs who had no recourse to modern 21st century geology. The reference is almost certainly therefore an allusion to a 'projection' from the Earth in the shape of tent pegs, i.e. **Awtad**.

078.006

Have We not made the earth as a wide expanse

078.007

And the mountains as pegs (Awtad)?

An Ancient Tent Peg (Inverted)



[\(Surface Illustration: Joseph Islam\)](#)

Relying solely on passage 78:7; Pharaoh can be thus referred to as 'Pharaoh of the Mountains' as mountains have been referred to as 'Awtad'. However, the only 'mountains' or 'projections' that the Bedouin Arabs were likely to visualise during their travels in Egypt which alluded to Pharaoh's might in terms of physical constructs would be the **pyramids**. This would have seemed to them as 'pointed tent pegs' i.e. 'Awtad' projecting from the surface of the Earth. Thus a more consistent rendering from a Quranic perspective would be '**Pharaoh, Lord of the Pyramids**' which would also take into account Surah Fajar (89) where Ad and Thamud's man-made constructs are being alluded to.

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 8, Page 2917

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] Ibid.

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