

Musings on Possible Origins of the Altabet Name and Family,
by Robert Altabet

Altabet Name Origins

I am not aware of any family tradition on either meaning of the name Altabet. It does show up occasionally on lists of Sephardic names in the Ottoman Empire (which could include Rhodes, Greece, and the Balkan states). At one time, we thought that all Altabets in the world were related, and while I have since come across some others that do not appear to be related, we all believe that if we could adequately trace back that we are related. In the United States, there would have been less than 300 Altabets in the year 2000 or the name would have shown up in the Census frequency tabs. There are some cognate names that may also be related:

1. Altabé (with acute accent on the e) – since the name at one time would only have been written in Hebrew script and rarely in Latin script, the et and the é would have the same sound since Latin character spellings in Turkey were highly influenced by French spelling conventions (one of the reasons that Ladino spelling in Latin characters does not look like Spanish).
2. Eltabet – Someone from France had gotten in touch with my sister Meryl seeking connections, having been told by her father that anyone with either name was related.

In speculating about the meaning of the name, there would seem to be 3 language possibilities, Spanish (Ladino), Hebrew or Arabic, all in common use in the Spanish period before 1492. While Turkish could also be a possibility, most Sephardim already had surnames before they got to Turkey and the names of Ashkenazim that later settled in Turkey (and assimilating with the Sephardim) are fairly well known. A non-Spanish origin from any place else in the Middle East would still bring us back to an Arabic or Hebrew source.

The case for an Arabic origin would be based on the initial “al” which could either mean “the” or as (al’) the [family of]. I researched possible meanings in Arabic of “tabet” under various possible spellings and, just in case it were a unitary word “altabet.” This yielded the most fruitful results which I will review in a moment. Another possibility is Spanish, but while “alta” has a Spanish meaning, bet does not. “Bet”, of course, could mean “house” in Hebrew or Arabic, but unless we were dealing with a particularly religious oriented word, I would tend to discount a mixed language solution.

Hebrew options

Hebrew does have some possibilities for an exact phoneme match, but these all differ from any of the traditional Hebrew character spelling of the name אלטבת, אלטבית, אלטבית, אלטבית (this last is the spelling used by father and in the family’s Ladino correspondence with Turkey [prior to WWII]). Such an alternate spelling actually shows up in a biblical verse with a meaning of “do not look”, but note the difference in spelling.

Samuel I 16 (This is a reference to David’s older brother Eliav, explaining why he would not become the anointed king)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-שָׁמוּאֵל אֶל-תָּבֵט אֶל-מְרֵאֵהוּ וְאֶל-גִּבְיָהוּ קוֹמָתוֹ כִּי מֵאֲסֻתֵיהוּ כִּי לֹא אֲשֶׁר יִרְאֶה הָאָדָם כִּי הָאָדָם יִרְאֶה לְעֵינָיִם וַיְהִי וַיִּרְאֶה לְלֵבָב׃

Voyomer Adonai el-shmuel **al-tabet** el-mari-ehu vi-el-g’vo-ah komato ki m’asteehu ki | lo asher yireh ha-adam yireh la-aynayim va-Adonai yireh lalevav.

7. But the Lord said to Samuel, **Look not** on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him; for the Lord sees not as man sees; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.

Some other Hebrew possibilities exist, for related phonemes with minor vowel transformation, but none looks like a likely real source: this includes the Hebrew month Teveth, some defective spellings of tovot (goodness) and from another biblical verse Judges 7:22

כב וַיִּתְקְעוּ שְׁלוֹשׁ-מֵאוֹת הַשּׁוֹפָרוֹת וַיָּשֶׁם יְהוָה אֶת חֶרֶב אִישׁ בְּרֵעֵהוּ וּבְכָל-הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיָּנֹס
הַמַּחֲנֶה עַד-בֵּית הַשָּׁטָה צְרָרְתָהּ עַד שְׁפַת-אֲבֵל מְחֹלָה **עַל-טַבַּת** :

Vayitk'u sh'losh-me-ot hashofarot vyasem Adonai et cherev eesh b're-ehu uvkhol-hamachaneh vayanah hanachaneh ad-beyt hashitah tz'reratah ad s'fat-avel m'cholah **al-tabat**

22. And the three hundred blew the shofarot, and the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow, throughout all the camp; and the army fled to Beth-Shittah in Zererah, and to the border of Abel-Meholah, **to Tabbath**.

And for a last Hebrew option, if we looked at Eltabet, this could break down in Hebrew to El-Tabaat, meaning “ring lord” or “lord of the ring”

אֵל-טַבַּעַת

Arabic options

Returning to Arabic, there are several possibilities depending on choices for spelling. It should also be noted that Tabet is a fairly common Arabic surname and a common given name, but I have not been able to find any Arabs with the name Altabet or al-Tabet.

Thabit is also a common Arabic name, and I have found at least one reference to an “althumbet” family in Saudi Arabia. Because the “th” can be pronounced as a dentalized t in some Arabic dialects, I have included this in my research, but it may not be correct since a Hebrew spelled version would likely have used Tav rather than Tet. (same issue as with the Hebrew alternatives above).

Tabet spelled (teh)(beh)(teh) could mean something like devoted one or penitent as used in the Qur'an,

QUR'AN CHAPTER 73: AL-MUZZAMMIL (THE ENSHROUDED ONE, BUNDLED UP)
Verse 8

وَاذْكُرْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ وَتَبَتَّلْ إِلَيْهِ تَبْتِيلًا

73:8 wadhkurisma rab-bika wa **tabat**-tal ilayhi **tabtiylaa**

Ahmed Raza Khan: Mohammed Aqib Qadri:

And remember the name of your Lord and, **leaving** others, **devote** yourself solely to Him.

Yusuf Ali:

But keep in remembrance the name of thy Lord and **devote** thyself to Him wholeheartedly.

Pickthal:

So remember the name of thy Lord and **devote** thyself with a complete **devotion** –

تَابَ

مَعْصِيَةٍ رَجَعَ عَنْ

تَابَ forsake

تَدِيمَ

be or become penitent

For the spelling (tah)(beh)(teh), which I would have considered more likely with its similarity to the Hebrew character spelling, there is no meaning. Other spelling variations that include the Arabic equivalent of the yod also yield no meaning. I would have hesitated about an Arabic spelling of Thabit, but the “th” can be transliterated as just “t” on occasion. Further, if the name were Arabic in origin, one might expect to see the name in Arab speaking countries as well, and we did find an “Althabet.” Of course, there may well be “Altabet” occurrences that simply did not show up on an internet search. For Thabit, the potential translations are below. And, the “brave” or the “dependable” or any of those other variations are very nice names.

ثَبَّتَ

أَكَّدَ , أَيَّدَ

ثَبَّتَ confirm , affirm

بَرَّهَنَ , أَظْهَرَ

**establish , testify , betoken , prove ,
evidence , be evidence of , verify , be proof
of , attest to , bear witness to**

رَسَخَ , مَكَّنَ , وَطَدَ

belay

بُرْهَان

ثَبَّتَ
المصدر testimony , affirmation , testament

ثَبَات

**firmness , fixedness , certainty , following ,
perseverance , solidness , certitude ,
resolve , toughness , verity , stillness ,
stability**

فَهْرَس , قَائِمَة

roster , list , index , catalog

مَوْثُوقٌ بِهِ , ثِقَّة

**dependable , trusted person , honest ,
entrusted , faithful , credible , confidential ,
calculable , trustworthy , true , trusty ,
authoritative , reliable , sincere , authentic ,
truthful**

وَيَقِيَّة , حُجَّة

document , deed

تَأَكَّد , نَحَقَّ

ثَبَّتَ
فعل be sound , be proved

رَسَخَ , اسْتَقَرَّ

steady , set , be unshakable , be lasting

لَمْ يَنْحَرَكْ

**be or become immovable , be or become
immobile , be or become standing , be
stationary , be or become static**

لَمْ يَنْعَيَّرْ

be or become constant

حازمًا كان شجاعًا

ثَبِتَ
فعل be unfaltering , be unflinching , be steadfast

فهرس , قائمة

ثَبِتَ
اسم index , catalog , roster , list

متين , ثابت : راسخ , مستقر

ثَبِتَ
صفة solid , fixed , durable , hard-set , lasting ,
stable , well-established , tough

ثابت الجأش

brave , undismayed , unfaltering , unruffled ,
staunch , self-possessed , steadfast , calm ,
undisturbed , tough , backboned ,
composed , collected , courageous ,
fearless , bold

ثابت العزم

unshaken , resolute , resolved , resolute ,
decided , unfaltering , unwavering ,
purposeful , backboned , determined

So for anyone looking for an Arabic spelling of the name, you could go with either:

The devoted one or penitent	Altabet	التبت
The family of the devoted one	Al'tabet	آلتبت
The Brave	Altabet	الثبت
The family of the Brave	Al'tabet	آالثبت

Altabet also shows up as an Arabic place name. There is an Al-Tabet in the Sudan; there is a Horsch Tabet (Tabet Park or Forest) in Beirut, Lebanon and an Abu Tabat in Syria. There is also an interesting reference in Berber (Morocco) literature to a Jewish warrior queen named Dihya al-Kahina bat Tabet (for her father).

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Lastly, I have been told by someone who speaks Catalan (the language of Catalonia in Spain whose major city is Barcelona) that the name means "tall pine tree" in Catalan, but I have been unable to verify this. An online site for translating words from Catalan to English did not yield anything, and I have not been able to come up with an English to Catalan site. The possibility of Catalan is interesting, since it would then suggest where the name originated in Spain.

Altabet Family Geographic Origins

I am not aware of any family tradition on where we came from in Spain (regardless of all the stories of Sephardim that have preserved such stories and held on to keys to their houses in Spain, I have yet to meet with anyone like that). However, at one point, as a child, my father told me the north of Spain -- perhaps only to quiet me down, since he no longer recalls it. He also told me that we were descended from David Melech, but he (or I) may have been mixing that up with a story that Grandpa David was named directly for David Melech, not someone in the family. He also thought that we were among the first exiles from Jerusalem with the royalty who were exiled with Jehoiakim, but this may be more in the way of a common Sephardi midrash that relates the line in Ovadiah "and the exiles of Jerusalem, who are in Sepharad" to this exile and which only later was applied to Spain. On the other hand if the Hebrew derivation cited above made sense, one could speculate that it related to a lineage from David Melech's older brother Eliav. The closest reference I have ever found for the name in Spain is for a close cognate "Altabas" (with alternate pronunciations of Tav, it could be connected) in Cecil Roth's "A History of the Maranos." Altabas, unfortunately, was a converso who stayed in Spain and was a religious painter of the late 1500s.

In Turkey, we know that Grandpa's family came from Tekirdaq (Tekirdağ in Turkish) which is 159 kilometers west of Istanbul on the coast. (We were probably among the last people to see the Jewish cemetery when we were in Tekirdaq, since it was being built over for high rise apartment buildings when we were there. Unfortunately, by the time we got there it was rather dark and difficult to see much. The name Altabet also shows up in several lists of families from Istanbul and from Rhodes. Tekirdaq was a major Jewish center and one of the synagogues in Seattle was founded largely by Jews from Tekirdaq. I have had someone ask if my family was from Tekirdaq based on my Hebrew accent as well.