sack, donkey-pack   אֲמְתַּחַת

1. Statistics

Torah: 15. Nebiim: 0. Ketubim: 0. Total: 15.

2a. Literal Use

The use of אֲמְתַּחַת is confined to three chapters (Gen. 42–44) of
the Joseph narrative. In Gen. 42 and 43 it denotes, together with
the terms → כְּלִי and → שַׂק, the sacks for the transport of victuals
that are lashed to a (pack)-ass (חֲמוֹר). When he opens the sack
(פתח שַׂק in 42:27, פתח אֲמְתַּחַת in 43:21) to fetch fodder (מִסְפּוֹא)
for his ass, one of Joseph's brothers discovers to his dismay the
money (כֶּסֶף) he had paid for the grain in his אֲמְתַּחַת (so 42:27;
according to 43:21 all the brothers). Joseph had ordered to put
(שִׂים 42:25; 43:22, cf. נתן 43:23) the money surreptiously back into
the sacks, as he did later on with his own beaker (→ גְּבִיעַ; 44:2). It
is stipulated explicitly that the money, or the pouch with money
(→ צְרוֹר, 42:35), is found 'in the upper part of the sack' (בְּפִי
אֲמְתַּחַת, cf. 42:27, 35; 43:21; 44:1, 8, 11). According to 44:1 an אֲמְתַּחַת
was usually filled with food (אֹכֶל) which in this particular case
must be understood to mean 'grain' (cf. 42:10; 43:2, 20; 44:25; the
words שֶׁבֶר, בָּר and אֹכֶל in Gen. 42–44 are apparently synonyms, as
observed by Redford 1970, 173). The sacks are filled (מלא, 42:25;
44:1) with grain or emptied (ריק Hi., 42:35), they are loaded (נשׂא,
42:26, cf. עמס, 44:13 which 𝔊 elucidates by adding μάρσιππος,
'sack, bag') or unloaded (ירד, 44:11). Nowhere the material of
which these sacks were made has been specified.

In the scholarly literature there is discussion about the exact
relation between the various terms used in Gen. 42–43. In 42:25,
35 the money is put back into (שׁוב Hi.) a שַׂק. 42:27 relates how
Joseph's brother finds the money in the upper part of his אֲמְתַּחַת
when he opens the שַׂק. In the parallel verses 43:18 and 43:21 it
is stated that the money was put back (שׁוב Hi.) into the אֲמְתַּחַת,
c.q. that the brothers find the money when their אֲמְתַּחַת is opened.
How should this variation be evaluated? Several attempts have
been made to distinguish sharply between the terms אֲמְתַּחַת, כְּלִי
and שַׂק in Gen. 42–43.

At a previous stage of research scholars tried to solve the

problem with the help of literary criticism by attributing אַמְתַּחַת to the Yahwist, and שַׂק to the Elohist (cf. *TWAT*, Bd. 7, 851). This necessitated taking 42:27-28 as a Yahwistic intrusion in the Elohistic chapter Gen. 42 (so e.g. Schwally 1891; Gunkel 1902; Skinner 1930). This solution fails to convince, mainly because of the parallel use of the two terms in 42:27 (the circumstance that the ⑥ reads μάρσιππος twice here must be attributed to harmonisation; so Westermann 1982, 118). Rather than by invoking source criticism, the ostensible tension between 42:27, 42:35 and 43:21 can be resolved by paying attention to rhetorical strategy (see, for example, Westermann 1982, 118-9; Sternberg 1985; Alter 1981).

A totally different interpretation has been given by Jacob 2000. In his view כְּלִי in 42:25 and 43:11 specifically denotes the containers ('Behältnisse') in which the grain was stored, שַׂק in 42:25, 35 would relate exclusively to the fodder-sack ('Futtersack') for the donkeys, whereas אַמְתַּחַת would denote the baggage/pack of the asses in general. In this manner it would be possible to delineate the semantic content of the three terms precisely. However, this proposal flounders on the circumstance that in 42:27 (see also 43:21) שַׂק and אַמְתַּחַת are obviously parallel concepts, as כְּלִי and אַמְתַּחַת are in 42:25 and 44:1. Therefore it seems best to agree with Soggin 1997:

> Man beachte die drei verschiedenen Wörter für 'Sack': *keˡlî*, wörtlich 'Behälter [im allgemeinen]', *śaq*, das übliche, und das seltene *ʾameˡtaḫat*. Dies weist nicht auf verschiedene Quellen hin, wie man glaubte, sondern auf den reichen Wortschatz des Erzählers.

In the chapters under consideration we are dealing with a variation of idiom to describe the same objects: the sacks of grain or fodder which were attached to the pack animals (so already Keil 1866 and Dalman, *AuS*, Bd 3, 198; Bd. 7, 246). The medieval Jewish exegete Nahmanides describes the אַמְתַּחַת as 'a big sack (שׂק גדול) having two sides (צדדין) which in the language of the Talmud is called מטראתא'. The latter is a Greek loan word (μετρητής) which in this instance designates 'a double sack' (cf. Cohen 1999; Sokolof, *DJBA*, 661).

2b. Figurative Use

Not attested in Biblical Hebrew.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

It is questionable whether etymological research helps us to understand the term אֲמְתַּחַת much better. Because the word occurs exclusively in the Joseph narrative, one might suppose that it is an Egyptian loan word. However, no Egyptian etymology has been proposed thus far. A derivation from the Hebrew preposition תַּחַת ('das Wort bez. ein Gefäss, welches oft zum Reiten benützt wird, so dass es *unter* dem Reiter sich befindet', so Bacher 1885) failed to get any support. Greenfield 1965 connected אֲמְתַּחַת with an Assyrian verb *matāḫu*, 'to bear, carry, lift up' (cf. *CAD* M/1, 403-4). Consequently the word אֲמְתַּחַת would not mean 'sack', but 'load, burden, pack' (this was taken over by *HAHAT*, 79: 'Sack, besser Ladung, Last'). This might also explain the rendering of the word by טוענא 'load, burden' in 𝕮 and 𝕾 (see section 5 below). However, Greenfields etymological and comparative philological argument in itself is inconclusive because it does not explain the parallelism between אֲמְתַּחַת, כְּלִי and שַׂק in 42:25, 27, 35; 43:11, 12 and 44:1.

More promising is the long-standing derivation from the Hebrew verb מתח, 'to stretch, spread out' which occurs once in Isa. 40:22 in parallelism with נטה. In Mishnaic Hebrew it is used frequently (see below). For the prosthetic א, cf. *BL*, 487; Klein, *CEDHL*, 37. The following cognates may be mentioned here:

AKKADIAN: *matāḫu*, 'to carry, transport . . . to pickup, lift', *CAD* M/1, 403-5.

UGARITIC: Del Olmo Lete, Sanmartín, *DULAT*, vol. 2, 599: 'a measure of length (?)'. However, De Moor 1981 and 1985 proposed to connect Ugaritic *mtpdm* and *mtḥm* with Hebrew → מִשְׁפְּתַיִם and אֲמְתַּחַת respectively in the sense of 'donkey-packs'. In Ugaritic these words are used metaphorically in the sense of layered 'stretches' of geological formations. See also De Hoop 1999.

Postbiblical Hebrew: Levy, *WTM*, Bd. 3, 295: Qal 'ausdehnen, ausspannen'; Jastrow, *DTT*, 861: Qal 'to extend, stretch'.

Jewish Aramaic: Levy, *CWT*, Bd. 3, 295: Peal 'ausdehnen, ausspannen'; Jastrow, *DTT*, 861: Peal to extend, stretch'; 780: מִיתּוּחַ 'stretching'; מְתְחָא 'extension'; מְתַחְתָּא 'stretching'. Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 719: Peal 'to pull, stretch, elongate'; 720 מְתָחְתָּא 'stretching'; Sokoloff, *DJPA*, 336: Peal 'to stretch'.

Samaritan Aramaic: Tal, *DSA*, 492: מתח 'spreading out'.

Syriac: Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *CSD*, 314: $m^e\underline{t}a\d{h}$ Peal 'to stretch out, extend, prolong', $m^e\underline{t}\bar{a}\d{h}\bar{a}$ 'stretching out', etc.

Classical Arabic: *mata\d{h}a* 'to draw, extend' (Lane, *AEL*, 2688; Dozy, *SDA*, t. 2, 575).

Ethiopic: Geez *mat\d{h}a* 'to be thin' (Leslau, *CDG*, 371).

5. Ancient Versions

𝔊 and other Greek versions: 𝔊 μάρσιππος 'sack, bag', Gen. 42:27, 28; 43:12, 18, 23; 44:1-12 [15x]. *GELS*, 290: 'sack, bag'; *LSJ*, 1081: 'bag, pouch'; *LSJ* Suppl., 203: add 'a kind of sackcloth'.

𝔐^T: טוען 'carrying bag', Tal, *DSA*, 320. The suggestion put forward by Z. Ben Hayyim *apud* Greenfield 1965, 90, n.2, is better discarded.

𝔗: טעונא, 'load, burden' in all Targumim in all instances.

𝔖: *ṭaʿnāʾ* 'load, burden, package' (Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *STS*, 181) in all instances.

𝔙: *saccus*, 'sack', Gen. 42:27, 28; 43:18; 44:1-12 [15x]; *sacculus*, 'little bag', Gen. 43:12, 21, 23; *marsuppium*, 'pouch'. Gen. 43:22 (a Graecism; also used in Prov. 1:14 to render → Hebr. כִּיס, 'bag').

6. Judaic Sources

Not attested.

7. Illustrations

A good drawing of the type of sack described above is found in Wilson, *PPSE*, vol. 2, 24, lower right corner:

See also the photographs Avitzur, 189-91 and Bolen, *PLBL*, tb060503203.

8. Archaeological Remarks

In Egypt grain was distributed in sacks (Kemp 1994). [Further text will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

The אַמְתַּחַת seems to be a sack for storing grain which was extended (מתח) like a piece of cloth and folded over the back of an ass by way of pack-saddle, hanging down both sides of the animal. Such saddles are also attested in Mesopotamian sources (Derck-

sen 2009, 92). At the ends the sack was tied shut (cf. Elliger 1978; see also Bacher 1891: 'אַמְתַּחַת, der Sack, der nur so gefüllt oder geleert werden kann, indem man ihn zieht, ausdehnt'). This explanation is supported by the context in which it balances כְּלִי 'container', and שַׂק 'sack', and also by the etymological cognates of the word, by several renderings in the ancient versions and by the interpretation offered by the medieval exegete Nahmanides. Although its material is not specified in the Bible, there is reason to suppose it was woven from black goat's hair (Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 3, 198). Exactly such a double sack made of goat's hair was used for the transport of grain on donkeys in Mesopotamia. It was called a *patnu* or *zurzu* there (cf. Salonen, *Hausgeräte*, Bd. 1, 188-90; Veenhof 1972, 8). Probably the אַמְתַּחַת did not differ greatly from the → מִשְׁפְּתַיִם and שְׁפַתַּיִם.

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