

**branch, rod, staff (arrow), tribe**

מִטָּה

**1. Statistics**

Torah: 142. Nebiim: 83. Ketubim: 26. Total: 251.

In the meaning ‘branch’ the word is attested 4 times in the Nebiim. The meaning ‘rod’ is attested 27 times in the Torah, 18 times in the Nebiim and twice in the Ketubim. In two instances in the Nebiim it is thought to denote ‘arrows’. The metaphorical meaning ‘tribe’ has become predominant in Biblical Hebrew: Torah 115 times, Nebiim at least 61 times, and the Ketubim 24 times.

This survey does not take into account Mic. 6:9. With regard to this verse, it is disputed whether מִטָּה means ‘stick, rod’ (so ט; Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 877; Rudolph 1975; Barthélemy 1992) or ‘tribe’ (so ט, ש, v; Kessler 2000; De Moor 2005), or should be interpreted as a participle hiph‘il of נָטָה, i.e. ‘who turns aside (justice)’ (so Van der Woude 1976).

**2a. Literal Use**

The basic meaning of an ‘unseasoned wooden branch’ can be inferred from Ezekiel’s allegory of the vine, in which it is distinguished from ‘thick boughs’ (עֲבֹתָ) and described as carrying itself ‘a mass of twigs’ (דְּלִיּוֹתָ; Ezek. 19:11; cf. vv. 12,14; cf. Rütty 1942, 54). The same botanic background occurs in the metaphor of the ‘blossoming rod’ (Ezek. 7:10f.: צִיָּץ; cf. Num. 17:23). Its wooden substance is sometimes referred to or implied, especially because it can be ‘broken’ (שָׁבַר: Isa. 10:15; 14:5; Jer. 48:17).

Wooden branches with the specific quality of being strong served different purposes. Apparently as travel sticks they belonged to the customary equipment of people on the way (Exod. 4:2; 14:16; 17:5, 9). They could be worked up to a piece of value so as to serve as a pledge (Gen. 38:18, 25). They were also used by shepherds (Exod. 4:2), farmers (Isa. 28:27) and miracle workers (Exod. 4:4,17,20 [Moses’ call]; 7:9, 10, 12 [Moses’ and Aaron’s second appearance before Pharaoh]; 7:15, 17, 19, 20 [first plague]; 8:1 [second plague]; 8:12,13 [third plague]; 9:23 [seventh plague]; 10:13 [eighth plague]; 14:16 [passage of the Red Sea]; 17:5,9 [Massah and Meribah]; Num. 17:17-25 [Aaron’s blossoming rod]; 20,8-11

[Moses' and Aaron's disobedience]). The solid, hard nature of a stick makes it suitable to use physical violence. In this context, it is mentioned as a tool of warriors (1 Sam. 14:27,43; Hab. 3:9,14), and task masters (Isa. 9:3), fit to strike people or to enforce rule (Isa. 10:5,15,24,26; 14:5; 30:32; Ezek. 7:10-11; Mic. 6:9 [?; see above]; Ps. 110:2). Hence, the stick becomes a staff, i.e. a symbol of authority (Gen. 38:18, 25; Jer. 48:17; Ezek. 19:11, 14: 'a ruler's staff'; Ps. 110:2; cf. the use of → שֶׁבֶט, 'staff'), as in other cultures of Antiquity.

In the same war-like context, the content of the term in Hab. 3 is contentious. *DCH*, vol. 5, 237 even assumes a different word and mentions various possible interpretations. In v. 9, parallel to 'bow' and in the plural, the meaning 'arrows', rather than 'sticks', seems self-evident. This meaning is thought to be supported by the Ugaritic word pair *mṭm* || *ksl . qšth* (*KTU* 1.3:II.15-16), and in v. 14, moreover, by the verb 'to pierce' (Hiebert 1986). Closer examination, however, of the parallelism in the Ugaritic text and of the usage of the cognate Akkadian term *mittu* reveals that the terms 'stave of the bow' and 'stick' or 'mace' form a word pair. The two weapons 'bow' and 'mace' belong to the traditional equipment of kings and warrior gods in the Ancient Near East. The plural מִטּוֹת in Hab. 3 can be explained as a plural of intensity, which agrees with descriptions of multi-headed maces and with archaeological findings of maces with a number of knobs (Tsumura 1996). Against this interpretation of Hab. 3:9 and in favour of the meaning 'arrows' for מִטּוֹת two points can be argued: 1) In the Ugaritic text quoted *ksl* may signify not 'string' but 'stave' (cf. De Moor 1980b, 425). 2) The term preceding מִטּוֹת, i.e. שֶׁבַעוֹת, may refer to the seven bolts of lightning which are compared to arrows (Day 1985, 106-7). The latter interpretation, however, is based on the *OT*'s translation of שֶׁבַעוֹת as 'seven', which is rejected by other authors as an emendation of *ו* (e.g. Van der Woude 1978, 63; Roberts 1991, 139). In light of all this, the meaning 'arrows', although it would be unique to Hab. 3, remains a possibility.

The staves of Moses and Aaron play an important role in the stories about the exodus and the desert journey, but sometimes

their appearance within the smaller narrative units does not look ‘logical’ (cf. Exod. 7:15,17 with 19,20; 8:1 with 2; 8:12 with 13; 9:22 with 23; 10:12 with 13; 17:9 with 11). This seeming incoherence functions in the reasoning of classical Pentateuchal source criticism (cf. *TWAT*, Bd. 4, 820-1: Exod. 4:2–4:20: JE; 7:15, 17: J; other texts: P), but given the actual imponderables with regard to this paradigm, a matter-of-fact description looks more appropriate.

Within the over-all set-up of Exodus and Numbers, Moses’ staff operates as a theologoumenon. At the leader’s call, his staff is the efficacious instrument of a miracle, so much so that at his return to Egypt it has become ‘the staff of God’ (cf. Exod. 4:20 with 2, 4 and 17 [‘this staff’]). At the first plague, Moses’ staff is still the staff of that first miracle, and in the announcement of this calamity, the boundaries between God and Moses are somewhat blurred: ‘By this you shall know that I am YHWH: behold, I will strike the water that is in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand’ (Exod. 7: 15,17). At the seventh and eighth plague, YHWH acts in response to Moses’ stretching forth his staff (Exod. 9:23; 10:13). The same holds true for the passage through the Red Sea (Exod. 14:16-17) and at Massah and Meribah (Exod. 17:5-6). In other words, Moses’ staff ‘is endowed with divine power and hence instrumental to the implementation of God’s will’; Polak 1996).

Aaron’s staff does not reach to the same level of significance. It operates under the command of Moses: at their second visit to Pharaoh, where it repeats the miracle wrought by Moses’ staff (cf. Exod. 7:9-12 with 4:2-4), and at the first, second and third plague, where things simply happen as God has announced, not by his intervention (Exod. 7:19-20; 8:1; 8:12-13). Nevertheless, while being secondary in importance to Moses’ staff, the staff of Aaron, as leader of the tribe of Levi, takes precedence over those of the other tribes by its miraculous blossoming ‘before the testimony’ (Num. 17:16-26). In this way the election of Levi to the priesthood is demonstrated. The fact that Aaron’s staff is to be kept before the testimony, is a warning to all who would protest against the chosen status of Levi.

Moses’ career tragically ends in connection to his staff. He

recognises the power of ‘the staff of God’ as able to bring about victory over Amalek (Exod. 17:9) but he fails in executing the commandment with regard to the use of that staff during the murmuring at Kadesh (Num. 20:2-13). While he is ordered to take the staff from before YHWH and to *speak* to the rock (v. 8), he *strikes* the rock with it, even twice (v. 11). Only YHWH, however, has the right to rule how the staff is to be employed. By not speaking to the rock but striking it, Moses diminishes the significance of the powerful word. Moreover, by speaking to the rebelling assembly instead of to the rock, he turns the revolt into an affair of honour between himself and Aaron on the one side and the assembly on the other: ‘Shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?’ (v. 10). By way of punishment for misappropriating the palpable symbol of YHWH’s sovereign might during the exodus, Moses will not lead Israel into the promised land (v. 12; cf. Kok 1997).

A specific meaning comes to the fore in the expression ‘to break the staff of bread’ (Lev. 26:26; Ezek. 4:16; 5:16; 14:13; Ps. 105:16). The common explanation holds it that ring-shaped breads (מִטְּבָה) were hung on horizontal wooden sticks in order to keep them safe from mice (Köhler 1945). The alternative explanation, ‘to break the sceptre of the god Laḥama (the god of the earth’s vegetive forces)’, lacks support from linguistics and the history of religion (cf. J. Schoneveld 1973, 132-45 *vs* G.C. Heider, *DDD*<sup>2</sup>, 502). The technical basis of the expression, i. e. breaking the wooden sticks, may have slipped away from its understanding whilst its basic purport, ‘to bring about famine’, prevailed.

## 2b. Figurative Use

The connotation of a staff as a symbol of authority may have generated the figurative, sociological meaning of ‘tribe’, referring to an ethnic group under the same ‘staff’, i.e. genealogically determined authority (cf. Num. 18:2: ‘the tribe of Levi’ || ‘the truncheon of your father’). However, since the names of the tribes were written on staves (Num. 17:17-18 [tr. 17:2-3]) it cannot be excluded that this meaning was derived metonymically from the standards (מִטְּבָה) after which the tribes of Israel used to march (Num. 1-2; 10). In the meaning of ‘tribe’, מִטְּבָה occurs 108 times in Numbers, 59

times in Joshua, 23 times in 1 Chronicles (furthermore in Exod. 31:2, 6; 35:30, 34; 38:22-23; Lev. 24:11; 1 Kgs 7:14; 8:1; 2 Chron. 5:2). It is nearly always used in connection with the names of Israel's tribes. This occurs, first of all, in lists and regulations (commonly attributed to the Priestly tradition) in the book of Numbers: with regard to the census (1:20-46), the encampment (2:3-31), the order of march (10:14-27), the dispatching of the spies (13:4-15), the appointing of overseers to the distribution of the land (34:18-28) and the legislation with regard to the inheritance of heiresses (36:3-12). Secondly, it is found in Joshua 13-22, in lists with regard to the distribution of the land and the settling of the tribes therein. (The Deuteronomistic and/or Priestly redaction of this material from the early monarchy is disputed.) Finally the term occurs in 1 Chron. 6, which contains the register of the tribe of Levi ('chronistisches Sondergut, das auf älteres Material zurückgeht'; Oeming 1990).

### 3. Epigraphic Hebrew

The figurative meaning 'tribe' is attested in two ostraca from Ḥorvat 'Uza, dating from the seventh century BCE (Dobbs-Alsopp *et al.*, *HI*, 527-34).

### 4. Cognates

Klein, *CEDHL*. 338, derives מַטְּבֵּן from √ מַטְּבֵּן. Its use in Exod. 7:19; 8:5-6, 16-17; 9:22-23; 10:12-13; 14:16 might support this derivation.

EGYPTIAN: Possibly *mdw* 'Stab, Spazierstock' is related (Erman & Grapow, *WÄS*, No. 642a; Hannig, *SP*, 585; *HAHAT*, 663).

AKKADIAN: In Akkadian, the term *mittu* is attested in the sense of a) a weapon of gods, made of stone, with the head of a lion or with fifty heads, probably knobs (cf. above under Hab. 3:9, 14); b) as an ax, mace or spade made of wood, silver or iron with gold inlay (*CAD* M/2, 147-8; D.O. Edzard, *RLA*, Bd. 5, 579; Tawil, *ALCBH*, 206-207). Possibly the term *ma-du-um*, *ma-ti-um* in the Ebla texts is also a cognate (TM 75. G. 2005 obv. III,13-17; TM 75. G. 1426 obv. III,8-13; cf. B. Groneberg, *RA* 82 (1988), 71ff.).

UGARITIC: The cognate word *mṭ* occurs in Ugaritic as 'rod, staff,

riding crop' according to Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, *DULAT*, 602. Especially the latter rendering is controversial, however, as the authors duly admit.

OLD AND IMPERIAL ARAMAIC: The word *mith* in the Balaam inscription from Deir 'Alla i.11 is probably 'rod' in the sense of an instrument of punishment (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, *DNSI*, 617).

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: See below under Judaic Sources.

CLASSICAL ARABIC: The first stem of verb *naṭā* (*nṭw*) seems to occur in the meaning of 'to extend' (Freytag, *LAL*, t. 297; Kazimirski, *DAF*, 1287).

It appears that מִטָּה is probably an old (Hamito-)Semitic word, a *maqṭal* formation of the root נָטַח 'to hold out, extend' (Gesenius, Roediger, *TPC*, 876-8; *GB*, 417; *BL*, §61nζ (491); *BDB*, 639-41; Klein, *CEDHL*, 338). The *maqṭal* formation is often used to describe instruments (compare → מִשְׁעָן from the root שָׁעַן) and so it was originally an instrument to extend one's reach. Cf. König, *HAWAT*, 220: 'v. מִטָּה: *Werkzeug* des Ausstreckens etc.'

## 5. Ancient Versions

Ⓞ and other Greek versions: The Ⓞ translates by means of *φυλαγή* in all instances where the meaning 'tribe' occurs. *ῥάβδος* is the habitual translation where the staff has a miraculous power (also in Gen. 38:18,25) and *στήριγμα* 'support, provision, staff' (*GELS-L*, 439) in the expression 'staff of bread'. Other words chosen are *σκήπτρον* 'staff, stick, sceptre' (*GELS-L*, 428) in 1 Sam. 14,27,43; Hab. 3:9, *ζυγός* 'yoke' in Isa. 14:5, *πληγή* 'blow, stroke' (*GELS-L*, 379) in Isa. 10:24, *θυμός* 'soul, anger' in Isa. 10:26 and *βακτηρία* 'staff, rod' (*GELS-L*, 76) in Jer. 31:17.

Ⓜ<sup>T</sup>: The literal rendering is חֲטָר (אֲטָר) or חוֹטָר (עוֹטָר) 'stick' (*DSA*, 266). However, in a Hebraising tradition it may become שֶׁבֶט in the meaning of 'staff' (Num. 17:18, var. אֲטָר), probably as a result of assimilation to passages where מִטָּה is used in the figurative sense of 'tribe' in which cases it is normal for the Targum to opt for שֶׁבֶט (e.g. Exod. 31:2, 6; Num. 31:6; 36:7).

Ⓢ: In the Targumim the literal meaning is commonly represented as חוֹטָרָא 'rod, staff', the figurative meaning of 'tribe' as שֶׁבֶטָא.

Rare exceptions are 1 Sam. 14:27, 43 where שוֹטֵיהֶם ‘staff’ (Levy, *CWT*, 460; in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic: ‘branch’, cf. Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 1117) is chosen as a literal rendering. In Isa. 14:5 מִטָּה is taken figuratively: הַקֶּבֶץ ‘strength’. In Jer. 48:17 and Mic. 6:9 it is paraphrased as מַלְכָּא ‘king’, in Ezek. 19:14 as חוֹבָא ‘sin’. In Jer. 19:11, 12, 14 מִטָּה becomes שְׁלִטְנָא ‘ruler’ and in Isa. 7:10 שְׁלִטְנָא ‘power, rulership’. The ‘staff of bread’ in Lev. 26:26 (Onkelos); Ezek. 4:16; 5:16; 14:13; Ps. 105:16 is taken figuratively as סַעֲד מִיִּכְלָא ‘food aid’. Targum Neofiti has שְׁנַעְדָּא מְזוּנָא which has the same meaning. סַעֲד has a double rendering חוֹטֵר כָּל סַעְדֵי מְזוּנָא ‘the staff, all food aid’. In Jer. 7:11 מִטָּה is paraphrased as a verb סַעֲד ‘to help, feed’.

⚭: The Peshiṭta too distinguishes between literal *ḥwtr* ‘rod, staff’ and metaphorical *šbt* ‘tribe’. The ‘staff of bread’ becomes *qny*<sup>2</sup> *d’bwr* ‘stalk of grain’. In Hab. 3:9 ⚭ interprets מִטָּה as *g’r* ‘arrows’.

⚮: The Vulgate too gives evidence of a systematisation. In the sense of ‘tribe’, מִטָּה is always rendered by *tribus*. In the strictly technical meaning of a ‘stick, staff’, *baculus* is the equivalent (Gen. 38:18,25), also in the idiomatic expression *baculus panis* (Lev. 26:26; Ezek. 4:16; 5:16; 14:13; only in Ps. 104 [105]:16 *baculus* is omitted, in agreement with ⚭). In all places where ‘the staff’ can be supposed to have something to do with God, especially in the plague and miracle stories of Exodus and Numbers, Vg uses *virga* (also in 1 Sam. 14:27,43; Ps. 109[110]:2). The same holds true for Isa. 9:4(3); 10:26; 28:27; 30:32, but in this prophetic book, if מִטָּה occurs parallel to שֶׁבֶט, it is rendered by *baculus* while *virga* stands for the latter word (10:5,15,24). In Ezek. 19:11,14, on the contrary, the word pair is translated by *virga / sceptrum*. In Hab. 3:9, ⚮ has interpreted מִטָּה as meaning ‘tribe’ (*tribus*) while common understanding prefers to it to mean ‘stick’ or ‘arrow’ (Hab. 3:9 [see above]; in the difficult text of Hab. 3:14, מִטָּה is exceptionally translated by *sceptrum*).

## 6. Judaic Sources

*Ben Sira*

In Jesus Sirach מִטָּה / σαγήπτρα occurs in the sense of ‘staff of power’ (35:23 [MS B]: ‘till he breaks the scepter[s] of the unrighteous’). מִטָּה לֶחֶם ‘staff of bread’ occurs in 48:2 (‘he brought a famine about them’) and the meaning ‘tribe’ (φυλή) in 45:6, 25.

#### *Qumran*

In the Dead Sea Scrolls מִטָּה is attested in the sense of ‘stick, staff’ in a quotation of Isa. 10:24 inserted in 4Q161:2-6, 9 and 11. In the sense of ‘tribe’ it occurs in the Temple Scroll, the Damascus Document and one fragment (11Q19 [11QT], 18:16; 19:14.15; 21:2,15; 22:12; 23:7; 57:6; CD-A 10:5; 4Q379, 1:5; cf. Charlesworth 1991).

#### *Rabbinic Judaism*

Both the meaning ‘staff’ and that of ‘tribe’ are attested in Rabbinic Hebrew (Jastrow, *DTT*, 765). With regard to the staff of Moses, allegedly created on the Eve of Sabbath (m. Ab., 5:6), Exod. Rabbah hints at it in a comment on Exod. 4:21 (‘all the wonders which I have put in your hand’), identifying the miracles with the staff, on which, according to the rabbis, the ten plagues were inscribed (Exod.R. 5:6 [Soncino ed., vol. 3, 84]).

### **7. Illustrations**

Especially in Egyptian art many types of staves, poles, scepters, rods, canes are distinguished (Hassan 1976; H.G. Fischer, *LÄ*, 49-57) and many hieroglyphs differentiate between them (Hannig & Vomberg, *SP*, 583-589). Among them is the possible Hamito-Semitic cognate *mdw* (see above). Apparently rods and staves were used both as weapons and as support for the convalescent and elderly. Ancient oriental rulers are often depicted with a staff in their hand as a symbol of their authority. Possibly this image was derived from the metaphor of the shepherd which kings loved to apply to themselves (cf. De Moor 1980a; *RLA*, Bd. 6, 252-3; *TWAT*, Bd. 7, 566-576; Van Hecke 2005). A shepherd often carried *two* sticks with him (cf. Ps. 23:4; Zech. 11), a long one with a hook, predecessor of the bishop’s staff, and a shorter one, a kind of mace, which became predecessor of the royal sceptre (cf. Moortgat 1966; redrawn in Keel 1972, 209, No. 313; see also *ANEP*, No. 414). The first served to prevent sheep from going astray, the second to scare off predators (cf. Power 1928; Dalman,

*AuS*, Bd. 6, 221-222, Taf. 36). However, as appears from Zech. 11, where the same word → מִטְּחָה is used for both staffs, the difference between the two implements was gradually obliterated in Israel.

### 8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.] See Salvesen 1998, 131-2.

### 9. Conclusion

The basic meaning of מִטְּחָה is ‘unseasoned wooden branch’. As such it became an obvious tool to extend one’s reach and so it designated a staff, a walking-stick, a rod for punishment or defence, and a pole to hang ring-shaped bread on. A staff could also serve a magic purpose. God endowed the staffs of Moses and Aaron with the power to work miracles.

As a shepherd’s tool it became a symbol of authority for rulers who were fond of depicting themselves as good shepherds. This connotation of authority may have generated the frequent figurative use in the sense of ‘tribe’, i.e. those under genealogically determined authority. Alternatively, this figurative meaning may have developed metonymically from the standards after which the tribes used to march. The figurative meaning ‘tribe’ is attested epigraphically since the 7th century BCE.

All ancient versions distinguish the literal from the figurative use of מִטְּחָה in choosing different renderings. Occasionally they opt for a more precise literal term or a different figurative interpretation.

It is impossible to differentiate between מִטְּחָה and other Hebrew words for staffs or rods (contrast D.M. Fouts, *NIDOT*, vol. 2, 924). It appears to be a synonym of → שֶׁטֶט (Num. 18:2; 36:3; Josh. 13:29; Isa. 9:3 [tr. 4]; 10:5, 15, 24; 14:5; 28:27, etc.) and → מִקְּלָה (Jer. 48:17) in Biblical Hebrew.

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W.A.M. BEUKEN

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