staff, support

1. Statistics

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Since the words מְשֵׁה / מְשֵׁה occur only once, moreover as word pair and parallel with מְשֵׁה, this survey takes them as intentional artificial deformations of the latter (Isa. 3:1). The masculine and the feminine form of the same noun can serve to express entirety (GKC, §122v).

2a. Literal Use

serving the literal sense of the stem, refers to a staff which offers support on a walk or journey, always with an accompanying purpose such as help for an infirm (Exod. 21:19) or elderly person (Zech. 8:4), a symbol of authority (Num. 21:18), herding the flock (Ps. 23:4) or an instrument for performing miracles (Judg. 6:21; 2 Kgs 4:29, 31). The travelling background keeps a low profile where the theological meaning of relying on Yhwh rather than on men is involved (2 Kings 18:21 / Isa. 36:6; Ezek. 29:6).

2b. Figurative Use

The second series of noun forms (מֵשְׁה and מֶשֶׁה) occurs only in the figurative sense of ‘support, stay’.

The first noun form (מֵשְׁה) refers to the basic needs of ‘bread/water’, the supply of which the leaders have to guarantee the people. This noun form occurs once more with reference to Yhwh (2 Sam. 22:19 / Ps. 18:19). As such the noun serves the biblical theme which is mainly expressed by the corresponding verb (משׂה Niph. + של) that people should depend on God rather than on anything else (Isa. 10:20; 30:12; 31:1; 36:6; 50:10; Ezek. 29:7; Mic. 3:11; Job 8:15; 24:23; Prov. 3:5; 2 Chr. 16:7).

The couple of the masculine and feminine noun forms in Isa. 3:1 מֵשְׁה / מֶשֶׁה refers to the subsequent list of professional groups (vv. 2-4). Usually the following לְכֵלָם לְאִישׁ מְשֵׁה is seen as an explanatory gloss (Duhm 1892, 44) but it might well be the writer’s intention to indicate that the basic supplies of
bread and water will be lacking when the leadership is removed (cf. vv. 6-7).

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

Etymologies thus far proposed for וָטָלָה are unconvincing (cf. HCHAT, Bd. 2, 483; HALAT, 1488; CEDHL, 672). Metathesis of וָטָלָא ‘to be strong’ (attested in Aramaic, and rarely in Sabaic and Akkadian) might be taken into consideration. Cf. Arab. ‘uššānat ‘trunk, stem’ (Kazimirski, DAF, t. 2, 264). Cf. the rendering of ו in Ps. 17:19, of א in Exod. 21:19, of מ in Isa. 3:1, and the association with strength in 1 QS XI 4-5 (see below).

5. Ancient Versions

ו and other Greek versions: נא renders וָטָלָה by πάρθος (6 times), only in 2 Kgs 4:29, 31 and Ps. 23:4 by βασιλεῖα. Both Greek nouns mean ‘staff, rod’. Apparently the translators regarded it as a synonym of וָטָלָה and של. In Num. 21:18 ו substitutes the noun by the infinitive χαράζεται, effacing in this way the concrete meaning of ‘staff’ in favour of its function of exercising authority. The abstract noun של is translated, likewise, by abstract nouns: πιστίνηγμα in 2 Sam. 22:19 / ἀντιστήργμα in Ps. 17:19 (both ‘support’), ἤσπας ‘strength’, in Isa. 3:1. In the latter text, the word pair של וה denomina is rendered by participles which maintain the difference of gender: ἵσαρον καὶ ἵσαρον.

ו T: Exod. 21:19 נא, ‘(supporting) staff’ (DSA, 320); Num. 21:19 ἕσσαρεν, ‘support’ (DSA, 597).

ץ: In Exod. 21:19, Fragm. A; Num. 21:18 ו and the Palestinian Targumim; 2 Kgs 4:29, 31 וה ‘staff, rod’. In Exod. 21:19 ו has מ ‘strength’ (WTM, Bd. 1, 115). מ ‘support’, is preferred in 2 Kgs 18:4; Isa. 3:1 (next to מ ‘support’); Ezek. 29:6. In Judg. 6:21 we find an isolated וה ‘staff’. And in Zech. 8:4 the Гор opts for paraphrastic ו ‘work’.

ץ: נא is always rendered by ἥπτω ‘staff, rod, sceptre’, except
in 2 Kgs 18:21 || Isa. 36:6 where *snk* ‘pillar, support’ has been preferred. מְשֶׁנֶה is paraphrased by the participle Pa’el of *sw* ‘to uphold, support’ (Payne Smith [Margoliouth], *CSD*, 369) in 2 Sam. 22:19, but by *prwq* ‘saviour’, in the parallel verse Ps. 18:18. In Isa. 3:1 it is freely translated with *snk* Pe’al ‘to sustain, uphold, support’. The other related words in Isa. 3:1 are rendered *smwk* and *smwkt* ‘stay, support’.

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\text{◊: This version translates מְשֶׁנֶה by 
\textit{baculus}, only in Judg. 6:21 by \textit{virga}, maybe because here the person holding the staff is the ‘messenger of YHWH’, who does not need a staff to support him. The abstract noun מְשֶׁנֶה is rendered as \textit{firmamentum ‘support’}, in 2 Sam. 22:19 / Ps. 17 (18):19, as \textit{robur ‘strength, vigor’}, in Isa. 3:1. In the latter text, the word pair מְשֶׁנֶה / מְשַׁמָּה is translated by terms which do not maintain the gender difference of מ, פ and ז: \textit{validem et fortem ‘the valiant and the strong’}.}
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### 6. Judaic Sources

In Sirach Hebrew, מְשֶׁנֶה occurs only in its abstract meaning. In Sirach פ it is equally rendered by abstract nouns (3:31: στήριγμα ‘support, staff’ [cf. 2 Sam. 22:19 / Ps. 17(18):19: οντοστήριγμα]; 36:29: θερμήσεις ‘rest’; 40:26: βοήθεια ‘help, aid’ [with regard to this verse, the Hebrew term is only attested in ms Masada; cf. Beentjes 1997, 160]).

The Dead Sea Scrolls are familiar with both noun forms: מְשֶׁנֶה is used, as in the Hebrew Bible, in literal sense in: ‘a delightful plantation . . . its sprouts with support (מְשֶׁנֶה נֶפֶר) (up to) the height of heaven’ (4Q433a, frag. 2, 5), but the figurative sense is also found in the expressions: ‘God’s support’ (מְשֶׁנֶה אל; 1QM IV 13) and ‘their (i.e. of wicked people) support is without . . . ’ (מְשֶׁנֶה קְלָל; 1QM XVII 4). The other noun form, מְשַׁמָּה, occurs, as in the Hebrew Bible, only in figurative sense: ‘What always is, is support for my right hand’ (מְשַׁמָּה יָד; 1QS XI 4, see also XI 5). The circumstance that מְשַׁמָּה is used here in parallelism with ‘a rock of strength’ (מְשַׁמָּה, 1QS XI 4) and ‘his might’ (מְשַׁמָּה, 1QS XI 5) suggests that מְשֶׁנֶה was associated with strength. The very fact that in1QHא XVIII the two nouns occur in the same figurative sense in close distance to each other makes
clear that in these later period the functional difference of literal and figurative use between them no longer applied; cf.: ‘You have not placed my support in robbery’ (22-23) with: ‘My support is in the refuge from up high’ (32).

In rabbinical sources, מַשְׁטַחְתָּה in its literal meaning of a ‘staff’ or rather ‘crutch’ is attested in b. Gittin, 72b-73a: ‘when he goes about on his crutch’ (with reference to a convalescent person).

7. Illustrations

8. Archaeological Remarks
[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

מַשְׁטַחְתָּה and its variant forms denote a strong staff providing the convalescent and elderly with a reliable support (밌שנה, ‘to lean on’), or serving the mighty as a symbol of authority. The circumstance that it is never used to strike might indicate that it was a sturdy, fairly heavy type of staff. Metaphorically it designated the unwavering support one expected from the deity. In the bible the noun forms (מיתשנה / מַשְׁטַחְתָּה) occur in the figurative sense of ‘support, stay’ only, but in Qumran also מַשְׁטַחְתָּה occurs in this metaphorical sense. So there is insufficient reason to suppose a formal differentiation between the literal and the metaphorical use of the nouns.

10. Bibliography

See in addition to the literature cited with מַשְׁטַחְתָּה:


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