layered fabric, sack, sheepfold

1. Statistics


2a. Literal Use

The word מִשְׁפָּר אֵל occurs only twice. In Gen. 49:14-15 Issachar is compared to a strong ass (סִינֶר רַב) resting (לַקְבֵּר) between מִשְׁפָּר אֵל. The direct context provides not much of a clue for a specific identification although the article suggests that the connection between מִשְׁפָּר אֵל and an ass was not uncommon. Moreover, the dual would seem to indicate that the ass was resting between two more or less identical objects called מַסְפָּר אֵל. And finally, the relation with v. 15b is not without relevance (see below). However, neither the material applied nor the shape of the מִשְׁפָּר אֵל is indicated.

In recent research three solutions have been suggested most frequently:

1) מִשְׁפָּר אֵל as ‘campfires, fire-places, ash-heaps, hearths’. This interpretation rests on a derivation from the verb מִשָּׁר which in texts like 2 Kgs 4:38 and Ezek. 24:3 is thought to mean ‘to put a cooking pot on the fire’ (so e.g. BDB, 1046; Albright 1950; E.E. Carpenter, in: NIDOT, vol. 2, 1144). However, מִשָּׁר does not have this specific meaning and although ‘fireplace’ might be fitting in Judg. 5:16, it is certainly out of place in Gen. 49:14.

2) מִשְׁפָּר אֵל as ‘sheepfolds’, ‘pastureland’ or ‘pens’. So many older dictionaries which were apparently inspired by the use of the term in Judg. 5:16 (cf. Ps. 68:16) where this meaning is indeed fitting because there is also talk of listening to the flute-playing (of shepherds) with the flocks (see for adherents to this opinion De Hoop 1998, 153, n. 449). In this connection O. Eissfeldt has pointed to the prong-shaped sheepfolds in East-Jordan (Eissfeldt 1949; 1954).

3) The third, most plausible, rendering of מִשְׁפָּר אֵל is ‘saddlebags, donkey-packs’. This has been defended in the past (Hogg 1927; Saarisalo 1927; Skinner 1930; see further below) and was
corroborated by new comparative linguistic evidence (De Moor 1981; 1985; 1993; 1997). The noun should be derived from \( \sqrt{tpd} \) (so still in Ugaritic) which became \( \sqrt{tpv} \) in Hebrew. The basic meaning of the verb is ‘to put one thing on another’ (see section 4). The noun is more or less an equivalent of \( \rightarrow \text{tpdv} \) – the Ugaritic cognates of the two words are used in synonymous parallelism. The dual form of the noun points to the fact that a sack is made of fabric folded in two and stitched around the edges. As a donkey-pack, several such sacks were interconnected in the middle and hung down the sides of the animal (cf. Avitzur, 189-91; Dercksen 2009, 92).

This background explains the imagery of Gen. 49:14-15. When the ass lies down (\( \approx \text{br} \)) with his heavy load, the bags on both sides rise up over him. This evokes Issachar’s residential area: the plain of Jizreel, on both sides bordered by mountains. The ass is willing to do heavy work, provided it feels good. That this is indeed the case shows the sequel in v. 15: his resting place is good, and the land is pleasant; so he bows his shoulder (\( \approx \text{bsm} \)) to bear (\( \text{lbs} \)) his burden (the \( \text{tj'T'm} \)). In other words, Issachar (‘man of wages’) is willing to take upon himself the unpleasant chores of a corvée worker (thus e.g. De Hoop 1999, 160-1; Macchi 1999, 152-5, both with nuances approaching the ‘labouring worker’ others prefer, e.g. Hamilton 1995, 668). Exactly the relationship between vv. 14 and 15 renders it plausible that the term \( \text{tpv} \) refers to a real utensil, the equipment with which the pack animal hauls on his heavy load.

However, the interpretation of \( \text{tpv} \) as ‘donkey packs, donkey bags’ in Gen. 49:14 encounters a problem in Judg. 5:16, the only other place where the word is used. The meaning proposed does not seem to fit the context there. In the middle of the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:1-31), which sings the praise of the vigour and fighting spirit of Israel’s tribes with captivating dynamics, the tribes of Reuben, Gilead, Dan and Asher are criticised because of their inaction (vv. 15b-17). Reuben is asked why he remained sitting (\( \approx \text{bsm} \)) among the \( \text{tpv} \) without taking part in the action. The singer gives the answer himself: because Reuben preferred ‘to listen to the piping for the flocks’ (\( \text{tpv} \)). The
herds are gathered by the piping of the shepherds. Reuben simply continues the daily routine of going out and coming in. Reuben hears the shepherd’s flute, but not the trumpet of war. It seems likely that must be rendered ‘sheepfolds’ here, not ‘donkey packs’ or the like. Yet a relation between the two may be suspected in two different ways. One might assume that the poet wants to evoke the everyday scene of a mule lying down between his double burden—the very picture of peaceful rest in general. Or, one might assume that the V-shape of the sheepfold in ancient Israel resembled the shape of a donkey pack with its multiple layers of bags (thus De Moor 1993, 491, n. 33; 1997, 121, n. 80). The proposal of Crown 1967 to render ‘to squat on one’s haunches’ failed to convince.

In view of the analogous wording and function in the context, most scholars (see section 10 below) assume that in Ps. 68:14 is a variant spelling of the term in Judg. 5:16—without preformative and with geminated . Moreover, some of the ancient versions translate the two terms identically. Ps. 68:14 is a crux interpretum; both the position of v. 14a and the meaning of v. 14b are a riddle to many. Often it is stated that v. 14a is a stray gloss from Judg. 5:16 (e.g. Isserlin 1971; cf. Kraus 1989). Indeed the similarity between Judg. 5:16 and Ps. 68:14 is striking, but there are more parallels between Ps. 68 and the Song of Deborah. The circumstance that in Ps. 68:14 the verb is used instead of (so Judg. 5:14) does change nothing in the meaning of the phrase—the lying down or sitting points to an undisturbed, acquiescent, passive attitude. Commentators disagree, however, on the meaning of the clause: are we dealing with a reproof, an adhortation, a promise, a wish, or an observation? An exegetical decision on this matter is possible only if the function of the ‘dove’ in v. 14b is clarified (for various proposals see e.g. Begg 1987; Hossfeldt 2000; De Moor 1997, 174, who believes that in Ps. 68:14 too the rendering ‘sheepfolds’ is appropriate).

The meaning of the technical term in Ezek. 40:43 is as uncertain as it is controversial. This verse too has been a crux interpretum from antiquity (see section 5) to the present day. The
context is a description of a room in the neighbourhood of the north gate of the temple in Ezekiel’s temple vision where sacrificial animals are slaughtered and washed (40:38-43). The vast majority of commentators agrees that the present sequence of cola in vv. 42-43 is illogical. It is thought that on the tables (שַׁלְחָנָיו) not both the slaughtering instruments (חֲלִילָה) and the flesh of victims (43b) can have been laid. Moreover, the function of the שַׁלְחָנָיו in v. 43a is missing in ך and v. 43a breaks off rather abruptly at ֵי. It seems most natural to relate v. 43b and v. 42a, and to reverse the order so that on both sides of the building concerned (מְקוֹם חֲלִילָה) the שַׁלְחָנָיו are attached (שַׁלְחָנָיו). They are assumed to serve for storing the slaughtering instruments (v. 42b, cf. Gese 1957; Zimmerli 1969; Block 1998). Following various ancient versions (cf. section 5), scholars render שַׁלְחָנָיו as ‘hooks, pegs’ or ‘ledges, shelves’.

However, no lucid explanation for the text in its present form has been given. Is it necessary to emend it so drastically as has been proposed? First of all, it should be observed that the emendation into a plural, proposed by BHS and others, does not recommend itself. Since adjectives do not have a dual, it is normal in Hebrew that שַׁלְחָנָיו is in the plural (cf. Waltke & O’Connor 1990; Gibson 1994). Furthermore it is illuminating to study the evidence from Egypt with regard to the tools and furniture used by butchers in antiquity (cf. Ikram 1995; Curtis, AFT, 165-73), because this seems to prove that the text of Ezek. 40:42-43 is perfectly acceptable as it stands. In view of their small dimensions, the ‘tables’ of Ezek. 40:41-43 are rather the slaughtering blocks which in Egypt too could be of both wood and hewn stone, often used simultaneously in the same chamber. The problematic שַׁלְחָנָיו simply means that the stone slabs which were only one cubit high (v. 42b) were on four of the tables mentioned in v. 41 (cf. v. 41b שַׁלְחָנָיו; such a stone slab is lying on the slaughtering block in a miniature model of an ancient Egyptian butcher’s shop, LÁ, Bd. 1, 1081-2). Since the slaughtering instruments, mostly knives and scrapers, were used on these blocks, there is no valid reason to assume that they could not be lying on these ‘tables’ when not in use (v. 42b). The שַׁלְחָנָיו which were fastened all around in
the building (v. 43) can only be the sacks in which the butchers used to suspend joints of meat for drying (Darby et al. 1977, 153, Fig. 3.41; I kram 1994: 77, Fig. 16; 82-83, with Fig. 17; 85, Fig. 18; Curtis, textitAFT, 170-2). Apparently the fabric served to keep away flies. The circumstance that they were only one hand-breadth (דָּמַן) wide in the case of Ezekiel’s temple (v. 43a) can be explained on the basis of the Egyptian practice to hang out long, narrow strips of meat for drying, somewhat resembling the South African ‘biltong’ (cf. Ikram 1995). The sacks sometimes had a tapering shape to accommodate the shape of the cut, not unlike the European custom to sell hams in a tapering sack or net.

2b. Figurative Use
Not attested.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates
On the basis of Ugaritic and Arabic the Semitic root can be determined as tpd ‘to put one thing on another’. This root may have developed into רָמָה in biblical Hebrew under the influence of nouns like רָמָה (Lam. 4:5) and רָמָה (Ezek. 40:43; Ps. 68:13) which suggest the development *'ašpadtu > *'ašpatt > *'ašpat and *šapadtu > *šapatt > *šapat (cf. SLOCG, §27.3; Joüon & Muraoka, GBH, §§100b and 181).

Klein, CEDHL, 394, 677, hesitates between ‘dual ash heaps’, ‘sheepfolds’, and ‘hook-shaped pegs’, but accepts the derivation from רָמָה.

Ugaritic: The word occurs as mtپdm, a metaphor for ‘folded layers’ of rock (Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, DLU, 605-6). Also the verb tpd G ‘to place one thing on another’ is attested (cf. Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, DLU, 925).

Postbiblical Hebrew: As the context betrays, רָמָה ‘border-mounds’ (?) and רָמָה ‘to place, pile’ (Jastrow, DTT, 1620) have apparently been borrowed from Biblical Hebrew.

Classical Arabic: Kazimirski, DAF, t. 1, 226: taffada ...
'Doubler, garnir en dedans une cuirasse de drap'; tafāfīd 1. Nuan-
ges blancs qui s’amoncèlent et chevauchent les uns sur les autres.
2. Doublure, pièces de drap dont on garnit en dedans. 3. Choses
 cachées sous d’autres'; matāfīdu Voy. le précéd. 2.' Similarly Freytag,
_LAL_, t. 1, 220. So the basic meaning in Arabic seems to be ‘to
fold one side over the other, make double, provide with a lining’,
from which developed ‘to pile, pack (said of cumulus)’, ‘to hide
one thing under another’.

5. Ancient Versions

Ø and other Greek versions:

Gen. 49:14 Ø and α: ἀνὰ μέσον τῶν κλήρων, ‘in the middle of
the inheritances’ (GELS-L, 258). ἀλλος: λεξίδων, ‘streams, pools’
( _LSJ_, 1047); σ: ἀνὰ μέσον τῶν γειτόνων, ‘in the middle of the
neighbours’ ( _LSJ_, 341). Graeco-Venetus: ἀνὰ τὰ ἡμιφόρτια ‘to
the half-packs’.

Judg. 5:16 Ø simply transcribes the Hebrew: μοσφαθημ. ØB has
ἀνὰ μέσον τῆς δινομίας, ‘in the middle of the double burden’
(GELS-L, 258; _LSJ_, 960). α: ἀνὰ μέσον τῶν κλήρων. σ: ἀνὰ
μέσον τῶν μετακιμίων, ‘in the middle of the frontiers’. ἀλλος: ἐν
μέσῳ χειλῶν, ‘in the middle of ‘lips’ (rims)’ (GELS-L, 1982).

Ps. 68 [67]:14 Ø ἀνὰ μέσον τῶν κλήρων, as in Gen. 49:14.
Ezek. 40:43 Ø γείσος ‘cornice , coping’ (GELS-L, 87; _LSJ_, 341. α:
ἐπιστάσεις ‘stoppers (?)’.

ח: The basic text J has ההלן דר ＊ק ‘among the nations’ (Tal, _DSA_,
411). Some other manuscripts have ההלן דר ＊ק, apparently
eymologizing with HebrewPredicate ‘tongue’, also ‘language’. Man-
uscript A has ההאיל ＊ק, probably with the same meaning (Tal,
_DSA_, 445, 693).

כ: ההלן דר ＊ק:
Gen: 49:14: כO has a double translation: אַחֲרֵיהֶם בְּמִצְעַר אֲשֶׁר הָיָה ‘his
inheritance between the borders’. כN בִּינֵי תְרֵין הָאָרֶץ ‘between
two borders’ (so also some other Palestinian targums). כPal בִּינֵי תְרֵין הָאָרֶץ ‘between the borders of his brothers’.
Judg. 5:16 אַחֲרֵיהֶם בְּמִצְעַר אֲשֶׁר הָיָה ‘between the borders’. A variant reading has

Ezek. 40:43 יִנָּלֵל, a Greek loanword (ἡγεμόνος or ἡγεμόνη), not ‘eine mit Widerhaken versehene Stange’ (so Levy, CWT, Bd. 2, 230), but rather ‘hook, rack’ (Jastrow, DTT, 30). No doubt this was based on the iron ‘hooks’ of m. Midd. 3:5, a passage, however, which bears a hypothetical character itself.

Ps. 68:14 בֵּין קַלְפָּלִים ‘between dunghills’ (Jastrow, DTT, 1368; Dalman, ANHT, 377).

Gen. 49:14 בֵּית שְׁבֵילֶה ‘between roads’.
Judg. 5:16 בָּיָנוֹת שְׁבֵיָבָי ‘between the roads’.

Ps. 68:14 בֵּית שְׁפַּאי ‘between the clearings’, cf. Payne Smith (Margoliouth), CSD, 590; Brockelmann, LS, 794 ‘offensa’; Costaz, DSF, 376 ‘pierre d’achoppement, stumbling-block’.

Gen. 49:14; Judg. 5:16 terminus ‘border, boundary’ (LD, 1859).

Ezek. 40:43 et labia earum ‘and their rims’.
Ps. 68:14 in medios cleros, after ô.

6. Judaic Sources

The words do not occur in Qumran, Ben Sira or rabbinic sources (see section 4 on the rare occurrence in Postbiblical Hebrew). Apparently these words became obsolete in later Hebrew.

7. Illustrations

A good drawing of the type of sack described above is found in Wilson, PPSE, vol. 2, 24, lower right corner (→ רהיטן). See also the photographs Avitzur, 189-91 and Bolen, PLBL, tb060503203.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]
9. Conclusion

The ancient versions are clearly at a loss how to interpret יִתְפָּר and יִיתֵפָר, words that apparently had become obsolete by the time the translators started their work. On the basis of context, etymology and iconography it may be assumed that יִתְפָּר and יִיתֵפָר designated objects made of fabric folded in two and stitched together at the edges to form a sack (→ תְפָר). As such it could designate a sack to dry freshly slaughtered and washed meat (Ezek. 40:43). Two or more such folded sacks could be connected and hung over the back of a donkey as a ‘donkey-pack’ (Gen. 49:14). Very few versions seem to have preserved a vague notion of this meaning, viz. א, which translates ‘in the middle of the double burden’ in Judg. 5:16, and the Graeco-Venetus rendering ‘to the half-packs’ in Gen. 49:14. In a metaphorical sense both words could designate a sheep-fold (Judg. 5:16; Ps. 68:14) whereas the equivalent in Ugaritic (מַפְדֵּמ) became a metaphor for multiple layers of rock and the Arabic cognate could designate cloud-packs, cumulus.

Actually the English ‘fold’ underwent a similar semantic development. The verb denotes bending a thing over itself, or ‘double’. Then also ‘to undergo bending or curvature’, said of rock strata, and ‘to enclose, envelop’. As a noun, it may denote ‘a part doubled or laid over another part’, but also curved or undulating layers of rock (Merrian-Webster), and of course also the ‘(sheep)fold’ has survived, the enclosure in which sheep are driven from the grazing land via its wide V-shaped entrance.

10. Bibliography


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