pole, carrying frame, yoke

1. Statistics


2a. Literal Use

The spies who were sent out by Moses to reconnoitre the land of Canaan cut off אבאד נספאל שעמה אחד, ‘one branch with a cluster of grapes’ in the Valley of Eshcol which was so heavy that they had to carry it on or in ב a carrying frame between two men (Num. 13:23). Usually this is interpreted as a pole from which the cluster hang, but the preposition ב renders this unlikely. Therefore many exegetes opt for a carrying frame, bier or stretcher which was called after its poles (metonymy). This is also the meaning of מָשָׁא in Num. 4:10, 12 where the covered lampstand מְלוּא is put on מָשָׁא. Summoned by David, the Levites brought up the ark מְלֹא, ‘on their shoulders’, further explained as מְלֹא בָּא, ‘with the poles on them’, ‘as Moses had commanded’ (1 Chron. 15:15; cf. Num. 7:9; 2 Chron. 35:3); thus מָשָׁא can be seen as an equivalent of מְלֹא here (cf. Exod. 25:10,12 etc.).

Symbolising the inescapable subjection to Babel, Jeremiah had to make straps מַשָּׁא מְלֹא, מַשָּׁא מְלֹא, parts of a yoke which may represent the yoke as a whole (cf. Jer. 27:8, 11, 12; 28:2, 4, 11, 14). In a more restricted sense two מַשָּׁא are the wooden pegs which are put into holes through the yoke beam on both sides of the neck of the animal and joined together with straps. This contraption served to attach the draught animal to the yoke-beam and kept the beam in place on its neck (Schumacher 1889; Turkowski 1969; Zwickel 1991; Deist, MCB, 191; Borowski, AIAI, 51-2; Viberg 2007, 128-44). With a pair of draught animals it also served to keep the beasts apart to allow the draw-bar to pass between them. Because considerable force was applied to the yoke the beam had to be heavy.

In Jeremiah’s case it may have been a light imitation of such
a yoke or מַעְלָה in Jer. 28:13 designates the wooden pegs around his neck, because Hananiah was able to break them with ease (Jer. 28:10-13) which he would not have accomplished if they had been forged of iron (ברד, Jer. 28:13).

2b. Figurative Use
Jeremiah’s symbolic act hints at the figurative sense of the terms for yoke: they symbolise subjection, oppression and bondage (cf. Ruwe & Weise 2002). Deliverance from Egypt can be described with the same imagery: יְהוֹה has broken the מַעְלָה of Israel’s yoke. The people is no longer bound and bent down like a draught animal, but can walk erect (Lev.26:13; cf. Ezek. 30:18; 34:27).

The singular מַעְלָה in Isaiah 58:6 and 9 is further removed from its literal meaning, though the imagery can be recognised easily: The fast for יְהוֹה is meant to undo the thongs (→ הַדָּגַת) of the מַעְלָה of oppression they have laid on the shoulders of others and break it, thus setting free the oppressed.

In Nah. 1:13 מַעְלָה, ‘his yoke bar’ (ヶ月[ה], מַעְלָה, ‘your straps’) is a designation of Nineve’s yoke of oppression which lady Zion had to bear and which יְהוֹה will break off her neck now (ヶ月[ה] מַעְלָה, ‘his rod’, which has been defended by several scholars, e.g. Spronk 1997, 72-3).

3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates
SEMITIC: The root is no doubt mw\gt\ which is attested in several Semitic languages (cf. Klein, CEDHL, 324; Leslau, CDG, 377; HAHAT, 641). It is certainly not related to → מַעְלָה (contra D.M. Fouts, NIDOT, vol. 2, 866). Since the Hebrew √ מא means ‘to totter’, it has been assumed that the name of the yoke bar מַעְלָה/מַעְלָה, ‘his rod’ was derived from its back-and-forth, up-and-down motion on the necks of the draught animals. In view of Geez myť / meťa, ‘to turn away, divert, repel’ and Arabic myť, ‘to remove, put at a distance, repel’ one might also think of a bar designed to keep the horned heads of the draught oxen apart.

EGYPTIAN: Possibly as a Semitic loanword in Late Egyptian mi\ud
(Helck, BAV, 513, No. 86; Hassan 1979).

**Old and Imperial Aramaic:** In the Balaam inscription i.9 mth occurs in a damaged context, but usually this is connected to mth ‘rod’ (cf. Hoftijzer & Jongeling, DNSI, 617).

**Postbiblical Hebrew:** In mBes. 3:3 and derived passages מות is supposed to be a long carrying bar, מות a short one. Cf. Levy, WTM, Bd. 3, 44-5; Dalman, ANHT, 227. Actually the passage states nothing about size and מ may have meant in a disjunctive sense, cf. DCH, vol. 2, 596.

5. **Ancient Versions**

ר and other Greek versions: In Lev. 26:13 מות is rendered דוסמִונְי לָךְ מְזָה, so the plural is understood as a singular ‘band, bond’ (Lust et al., GELS-L, 99).

In Num. 4:10,12; 13:23: 1 Chr. 15:15 ר renders ἀναξοφόρους, ‘bearer, carrying-pole, stave’ (GELS-L, 33-4).

In Isa. 58:6 ר understands מות in a metaphorical sense: πᾶσιν συγγραφήν ζώσκον, ‘and every unjust contract’ (GELS-L, 444; see below on the ז) whereas only a few verses further on (Isa. 58:9 מות is rendered more or less literally: συνδέσμονον, ‘band, fetter’ (GELS-L, 455).

In Jer. 28:13; Ezek. 34:27 ר opts for κλοίων, ‘chain, bond’, but also ‘yoke’ (GELS-L, 259). In Ezek. 30:18 ר may have read מִשָּׁה מֵאֹר, ‘his rod’.

ז: ר has מֵאֹר in Num. 4:10, 12; 13:23, apparently equating מות with מֵאֹר. In Num. 4:10, 12; 13:23 ז has מַסּוּז, ‘basket’, but ר has מַסָּה, ‘pole’ in Num. 4:10 and 13:23. The latter rendering is also chosen in the Targum of 1 Chron. 15:15. In Jer. 27:2; 28:10, 12, 13 ז renders מַסּוּז by מַסָּה, ‘yoke’. Surprisingly, the same rendering is chosen in Ezek. 34:27 where one would expect the Targumist to explain the metaphor.

In Lev. 26:13 ר interprets מִשָּׁה מֵאֹר as מַסָּה מֵאֹר, ‘the yoke of the nations from you’. The Palestinian targums have understood the metaphor in a similar way here. In Isa. 58:6 the Targum paraphrases מַסּוּז twice as מַסֲמָה מֵאֹר ‘perverted judgment’ and in 58:9 as מַסֲמָה מַסָּה ‘perversion of judgment’. In Ezek. 30:18 the metaphor is recognised and rendered by מַסָּה, ‘strength’.  

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**Pole, Carrying Frame, Yoke**

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In Num. 4:10, 12; 13:23 ḥwḥ, according to the Syriac dictionaries ‘carrying staves, poles’, but cf. ḥ. In Lev. 26:13, Ezek. 34:27 and Nah. 1:13 the literal nyr is chosen, in Isa. 58:6 ḥwḥ. Both words mean ‘yoke’. In Isa. 58:10, however, ḥwḥ is rendered nkl, ‘deceit, perfidious’ (cf. ḥ). In Jer. 27:2 ḥ translates by hnk, ‘the collar (or strings) of a yoke’ (Payne Smith [Margoliouth], CSD, 150), but this may be a simple transposition of מַעַלְשֶׁה which is rendered nyr, ‘yoke’. The word ḥwḥ becomes ḏg’hนq, ‘falsehood-strings’, in Jer. 28:10, 12, 13. In Ezek. 30:18 ḥ follows ḥ with hwtr, ‘rod’. In 1 Chron. 15:15 the word is skipped.


6. Judaic Sources

In 4Q437 fragm 2, Ḥ13 מַעַלְשָׁהוֹם ‘their [y]okes’ occurs in broken context. See further section 4, Postbiblical Hebrew.

7. Illustrations

For photographs and drawings of comparable yokes see E. Schiller (ed.), The Holy Land in Old Engravings and Illustrations, Jerusalem 1977, 64a (W. Rae Wilson 1819); 242, 247 (Ch.W. Wilson 1880); 285 (P. Lortet 1884); Ch. W. Wilson, Picturesque Palestine, Sinai and Egypt, vol. 1, London 1880, No. 72; vol. 2, No. 17, 128; Dalman, AuS, Bd. 2, Plates 18, 21b, 25, 29, 33, 41; Salonen, Agriculture, Taf. VI.2; XII.1; XIV.2; Stager, LBI, 90. For a modern reconstruction at the Ekron Museum, see Bolen, PLBL, disk 1, 2 (Samaria): Cultural Pictures, 71-27tb.jpg and tb n031500.jpg.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

A ḥwḥ is used as a carrying pole or frame to transport heavy objects. Generally the ḥwḥ designates a heavy yoke bar, or the pegs used to fasten a yoke with straps on the neck of a draught animal.
As such it became the image of oppression of humans. To break the yoke (bars) means liberation of the oppressed. Jeremiah wore (a light imitation of?) such a yoke as a symbolic representation of the oppression he had to announce.

10. Bibliography


1. die Tragstange 2. das Querholz des Joches 3. überhaupt: das Joch’ – IDB, vol. 4, 925 – ISBE, vol. 4, 1164-5 – KBL, 502: מָשׁ ‘Traggestell, bar’ (Num.4:10, 12); ‘Stange, bar’ (Num. 13:23); for Nah. 1:13; Ps. 66:9; 121:3 emendations are proposed. ‘Jochholz, bar of a yoke’ (Lev. 26:13; Jes.58:6, 9 ; Jer. 27:2; 28:10,12, etc.); Traghölzer, carrying poles (1 Chron. 15:15) – LHA, 416: ‘feretrum ex vecte vel vectibus constans, graviss vectis ligneus’ (Jer.28 :13 ferreus) – Kaddari, MHH, 587-8: 1. מָשׁ א. מָשׁ ו. מָשׁ 2. מָשׁ ו. מָשׁוּר ו. מָשׁוּר


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